

Know who's in your home: Sister's murder prompts Lewisville woman to check service technicians' backgrounds

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By: Nicole Bywater

Nearly three years after her sister was raped, beaten to death and had her body set on fire to try to destroy the evidence, Lucia Bone, 46, of Lewisville has started a nonprofit cause in her sister's memory with hopes of preventing this horror from happening to someone else.

The man convicted and sentenced to life in prison for killing Bone's sister, Sue Weaver, was a service technician sent by a major department store to clean the air conditioning ducts in her Orange County, Fla., home. Six months later, the man, Jeffrey Hefling, came back to the house and killed her. He set Weaver's body and her bedroom on fire, where it would have remained completely burned if it hadn't been for a driver that was delivering a package Bone sent to her sister that Monday morning. The driver smelled smoke and called police. Weaver was 52 at the time of her murder. After Weaver's death, her family learned that Hefling was a twice-convicted rapist and known sex offender. He had been released in 1998 after serving 12 years of a 30-year sentence. His supervisor, who was also on the service call, had been previously convicted for breaking and entering.

"What happened to Sue was horrific," Bone said. "But it's not an isolated case. We've found at least 14 other victims just going through the news that have had similar things happen to them."

These cases involve convicted criminals working as pizza delivery drivers, apartment maintenance people, carpet cleaners and home health cleaners, and are documented on the group's Web site, www.suweavercause.org.

Bone said she isn't trying to be an alarmist, but wants to alert people to the dangers that are there.

"When you go out on a blind date, you remove yourself from the dangers that could be there," she said. "You tell people where you're going or you meet in a public place. There's so many times people unknowingly put themselves in situations that are dangerous. This has changed the way I view the world."

Background checks are getting easier and less expensive to do, as technology improves. A simple online search done by Bone's 78-year-old mother on the day of his arrest revealed Hefling's sex offender registry.

"There's no excuse for him to be employed in the job he was," Bone said. "I have no problem with criminals holding jobs and being part of society, just not in the capacity where they're alone with the public, especially in somebody's home."

Last month, Weaver's estate settled a claim against Burdines, which is owned by Federated Department Stores, and the subcontractor. The proceeds are being used for Bone's national consumer awareness campaign and to lobby for legislation to require background checks on employees. Bone has named the efforts the Sue Weaver CAUSE, which stands for "Consumer Awareness of Unsafe Service Employment."

Even beyond a commitment to the safety of their customers, Bone said the settlement should cause employers to think about the liability aspect of not doing background checks on their employees.

"Insurance companies need to get involved," she said. "They could offer discounts for employers that do background checks and make those that don't, accountable for their actions."

But consumer awareness is also needed and it's the responsibility of a homeowner to question any company that's sending people into their home, Bone said.

"You have the right to ask a company if they do background checks and if so, what type," she said. "Just because you think you're hiring a reputable company, doesn't mean they're doing them. Ask for proof. Sue was using a reputable company."

Bone said a serviceman inside a house, whether they are alone or with the homeowner, has the perfect opportunity to "case" a home. They can easily learn the layout, where the alarms are, if there are valuables inside, if there is a dog inside, if a person lives alone, what their schedule is and other valuable information that can be used to commit a crime.

"It's a way of finding their next victims," she said. "People also will think they're safer if they've got their kids with them, when that actually can make them more vulnerable, because a criminal might use their kids then." She is also pushing for background checks in other areas, such as for retail or restaurant employees who are left alone with just one other employee, while working.

"Sue was no different than you or me," Bone said. "There are no boundaries to being a victim."

The department store responsible for the duct cleaning in Weaver's case, Burdine's, had employed Hefling through a subcontractor. Neither company had done a background check on Hefling, which would have revealed his previous convictions.

After several trial delays, Hefling pled guilty on March 3, 2003, to first-degree murder and three other charges related to Weaver's death. In addition, DNA evidence recovered in Weaver's case led Hefling to plead guilty to the 1994 rape of another Florida woman.

"We agreed to a plea bargain so that we wouldn't have to go through everything again if the case was appealed," Bone said. "I also know that dying a natural death would be more difficult for Sue's killer. Knowing he was going to die and being able to prepare for it is too humane for him. My sister never got to do those things."

The sisters, were like twins – born eight years and eight days apart, Bone said. They would go shopping and come back with the same exact selections. Even the timing of events surrounding Weaver's murder and the trial was "Godly," Bone said.

The two talked on the phone or via the computer several times a day about work issues and their lives.

"It was weird when she wasn't online," Bone said. "And right about the time she would have been murdered, my computer locked up and I had to reboot it. There were a lot of things like that that you think about after the fact."

Weaver was killed on Aug. 27, 2001. Bone and her husband, Michael, were scheduled to fly to Florida to see her body on Sept. 12, but the flight was canceled because of the terrorist attacks the previous day. They were able to go on Oct. 1, the same day Hefling was arrested. After 2/1–2 years of trial delays, Bone agreed to the plea bargain.

Weaver started a custom embroidery business in 1994. Bone followed the same passion in 1995, when she also started an embroidery business in Texas. She was like a second mother to Bone's three children, she said. Bone said she's been overwhelmed by the support she seen for the cause and the love people that knew her sister have expressed. One of her former clients in Florida has offered a \$500 award in Weaver's memory to the embroidery digitizer of the year.

"That just shows how much she was loved by her clients that they feel this ongoing commitment to her," Bone said. After her sister's death, Bone said she struggled to cope and figure out what the right thing to do was.

"I just fell into a hole because there weren't any [support] groups that I fit into," she said.

When asked what she thought her sister would do if the roles were reversed, Bone said, "I don't think she would have waited as long. I think she would have done more."

In the future, Bone said she'll continue to add on more goals to her vision, as they are accomplished. And in everything she does, she is reminded of her sister. As long as she can stay focused on the cause, it's worth all the emotion that work stirs up, she said.

"When a person dies, all you have left are memories and their possessions," Bone said. "Most of her things were ruined in the fire, but what I do have helps in keeping her close. There are some of her files in my garage that I see every time I walk past and I know that the smell of smoke will never go away from."

But the sister's most prized possession is kept in the top of her master closet. It's a grey-haired Ogre stuffed animal that Bone first sent to Weaver on her 40th birthday.

Weaver sent it back to Texas as a joke on Bone's 40th birthday. It popped back up in Florida, with a new button attached to the animal, on Weaver's 50th birthday.

"It's really an ugly animal, but it was us – always loving and teasing back and forth," she said.

Bone continues to nurture one of Weaver's hobbies, taking care of orchids. She keeps them at her office and has done pretty well so far, using the last trash bag of her sister's secret "magic mix" of fertilizer. The bag is almost empty.

"Her death was so unnecessary and so horrific that this is just something I have to do," Bone said. "It's something I want to do. I don't want anything except to know that something good has to come out of it."

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