

The Case of Betty Jane Spencer

On the night of February 14, 1977, Betty Jane Spencer and her sons Ralph, 14, Reeve, 16, Raymond, 18, and Greg, 22, were at their home in a rural county in Southwest Indiana. Betty's husband, Keith, was at work at a local television station.

When the family heard someone outside, they opened the front door and were confronted by four young men, aged 17, 20, 21, and 23. These men, all armed with guns, forced their way in and ransacked the house looking for things to steal. After 30 minutes or so, the intruders ordered Betty and her sons to lie face down on the living room carpet and shot them all. The four boys were killed. Somehow, despite having been shot three times in the back and shoulder, Betty managed to get to a neighbor's house to call for help. Betty's injuries were so serious that it took her months to recuperate. As she would later say, "They murdered all five of us that night. I just happened to survive."

The crime disrupted the normally calm atmosphere of the Spencer family's community, where people didn't even lock their doors. The boys' friends and their parents grieved, and many suddenly felt vulnerable themselves. In the first few months after the murders, some 800 new gun permits were issued to county residents who were concerned about their safety and the safety of their families. The trusting and open atmosphere of the community gave way to anxiety and fear.

The police began their investigation by noting Betty's description of the four young men. Because the police were so concerned about the couple's safety, Betty and Keith were not allowed to return to their house right away. It was not until a month later that a tip from a police informant paid off, and the first of the four suspects was arrested. Within a few months, all four had been apprehended and two had confessed.

The trials for the two suspects who did not confess were held in the next county because of all the publicity. Betty's testimony recounting the agonizing events of that February night was a significant help to prosecutors. All four men were given life sentences in prison.

In the years after the murder, Betty and Keith worked to deal with their grief over the loss of their sons. In 1979, Betty joined Protect the Innocent (PTI), an Indiana group that works to strengthen the state's criminal laws and the rights of victims.

Along with other victims of crime who had joined PTI, Betty successfully lobbied the Indiana legislature for the passage of several laws. The new laws focused on tightening bail and parole procedures, providing standards for a "guilty but mentally ill" defense, and requiring judicial review of proposed releases of criminally insane patients from state hospitals.

In addition to her work with PTI, Betty trained to become a crisis counselor who works with individual victims. Volunteer work helped her recovery emotionally, she says "but recovery is never complete after a thing like that. The thing that you work for is to have more good days than bad ones. For me, becoming an activist helped me get there. It gave some meaning to my boys' death if I could make it a little easier for other victims."



In 1988, Betty and Keith separated, and she moved to Florida. “Family members who have been traumatized by violent crime come out of their ordeal very different people. We see a high level of estrangement and divorce in victimized families,” Betty explained, adding, “Unfortunately, Keith and I had to pay that hidden cost of crime.”

Betty became the director of the Florida state office of Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) and continued her lobbying and victim assistance work through that organization. She has since retired and returned to Indiana.

Questions

1. Who was Betty Jane Spencer? What happened to her?
2. Do you think her experience as a victim was typical or unusual? Explain your answer.
3. What did she do after she began to recover from the crime? What types of issues did she work on?
4. Why do you think it helped Betty to share her experience with other victims?

