



# Wild Child Speechless After Tortured Life

**Abandoned by Doctors and Mother, Abused in Foster Care, 'Genie' Regressed**

By **SUSAN DONALDSON JAMES**

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They called her "Genie" -- a pseudonym to protect her privacy -- because since infancy her life had been bottled up in the horrors she experienced in one dimly lit room.

Alternately tethered to a potty seat or tied up in a sleeping bag in a mesh-sided crib under a metal cover, Genie had contact only with her abusive father during nearly 12 years of confinement.

After her emergence from that torture in 1970, the waiflike child became a cause celebre among researchers and do-gooders who wanted both to learn from her and save her. For doctors, her case is like that of the three children recently released from years of isolation in an Austrian cellar.

The world read with revulsion last week the details of Austrian Josef Fritzl's 24-year imprisonment and abuse of his daughter and three of the seven children he fathered with her.

The twists of Genie's life since her release -- a succession of breakthroughs, setbacks and manipulations at the hands of caregivers, researchers and foster homes -- offer some perspective on the path ahead for the severely stunted Austrian children, who communicate mostly in simple grunts and gestures, much like Genie did after her rescue.

During the four years she was under the intense care of specialists at Children's Hospital at UCLA, Genie progressed, but only briefly.

Though she eventually learned to speak, the team of credentialed doctors with millions of dollars in federal funding could not rescue Genie from a fate of abuse and exploitation.

Doctors argued over her care and affections. Finger-pointing, hateful allegations and a lawsuit followed. Even storytellers and filmmakers took sides, and ultimately, Genie regressed.

Today Genie is 51. She is again in psychological confinement as a ward of the state -- her sixth foster home. And again, she is speechless.

"We fumbled the ball," James Kent, a consulting psychologist for the Victims of Crime program in California and Genie's psychologist told ABCNEWS.com. "We had the opportunity to allow more of her potential. It was as much out of ignorance as disagreements."

**Brutal Conditions, Stunted**

Genie's story began 20 months after her birth in 1957. Believing she was mentally retarded, Clark Wiley locked his daughter away, separating her from her nearly blind mother and 6-year-old brother, under the guise of protecting her.

Wiley spoon-fed her only Pablum and milk, and spoke to her mostly in barks and growls. He beat her with a wooden paddle every time she uttered a sound.

In 1970, Genie's 50-year-old mother, Irene, escaped with Genie, then 13. Her brother, John, then 18, was left behind, and told ABCNEWS.com that he, too, had been abused at the hands of his father -- a man who was raised by a "bar girl" in a bordello and didn't "pamper or baby."

Mother and child turned up at welfare offices in Los Angeles, seeking financial support. Caseworkers noticed the odd child, who spat and clawed and moved in a jerky "bunny walk," with her hands held out front.

The Wileys were charged with child abuse, but the day they were to appear in court, Clark Wiley shot himself to death after reportedly leaving a note that read: "The world will never understand."

John Wiley, now 56 and a housepainter in Ohio, admitted he had often been in the room where Genie was tortured. "Whether I liked what I seen or not, it wasn't like I was in a position to tell my mom. I was a captive audience and could do nothing about it."

### **Ward of the State**

When she entered Children's Hospital at the age of 14 -- still in diapers -- Genie was the size of an 8-year-old with the language and motor skills of a baby, speaking only a few words -- including "stopit" and "nomore."

Her discovery coincided with the premiere of Francois Truffaut's film "The Wild Child," about an 18th century French "wolf boy" and the doctor who adopted and tried to civilize him.

Riveted during a private showing of the film, the staff assigned to Genie's care applied for a grant from the National Institute of Mental Health to study Genie's rehabilitation.

The hottest academic issue of the day was the 1967 Lenneberg theory that maintained that children cannot learn language after puberty. In some ways, Genie disproved this, but she had passed the "critical period" and was never able to master grammatical structure.

From 1971 to 1975, a multidisciplinary team used Genie as a case study -- "Developmental Consequence of Extreme Social Isolation" -- under the direction of Dr. David Rigler.

The team was mesmerized by her charisma and curiosity. Susie Curtiss, just out of graduate school in theoretical linguistics, was a member of the team and worked with Genie on language acquisition.

"I was a very young woman given the chance of a lifetime," Curtiss, now a professor of linguistics at UCLA, told ABCNEWS.com.

"She wasn't socialized, and her behavior was distasteful, but she just captivated us with her beauty," said Curtiss, who took the child on daily outings.

Because of the Genie study, doctors now know that grammatical development needs linguistic stimulation. When children are isolated from language, a window closes and they lose the ability to speak in sentences.

### **'We Fell in Love With Each Other'**

"I spent most of my time being a human being, relating to her and we fell in love with each other," Curtiss said. "I wasn't old enough to be her mother, so I was able to be somewhere between a sibling and a parent. Genie was just amazing."

Curtiss described Genie as "highly communicative," despite the fact that she spoke fewer than 20 words at the onset. She often made her needs known by gesturing or other means, and she loved being stroked and hugged, and learned to hug back, according to Curtiss. When she was upset, at first she had a "tearless cry," but eventually she "showed emotion very clearly."

In her textbook, "Genie: A Psycholinguistic Study of a Modern-Day Child," Curtiss described how Genie eventually could use limited language to describe her father's cruelty: "Father Hit Arm. Big Wood. Genie Cry."

Believing that a loving home would help Genie's development, some of the specialists became her foster parents. At first psychologist James Kent became a father figure. He had argued unsuccessfully that Genie should not be separated from her mother, the one emotional attachment in the child's life.

Soon, Jean Butler, Genie's nursery school teacher while in the UCLA study, took the child under her wing. But Butler, who has since died, became obsessed with making a name for herself, Curtiss said in a 1994 documentary called "The Secret of the Wild Child."

According to Curtiss, Butler told colleagues she wanted to be the next Annie Sullivan -- the so-called "miracle worker" who taught language to the blind and deaf Helen Keller.

Soon, team members were divided into combative camps, accusing one another of exploitation. Butler criticized the team members for overtesting the child and other infractions. Rigler eventually asked Butler to leave, according to Kent. "She was an odd person," he said.

### **Research Head Became Foster Parent**

In 1971, Rigler and his wife, Marilyn, became Genie's legal foster parents. She learned sign language and continued to progress. But by 1975, NIMH officials -- citing poor organization and lack of results -- refused to renew the study grant. The Righlers, who had received compensation as foster parents, then ended their care.

ABC News was unable to find current contact information for Rigler, who is now 87 and reportedly in failing health. But in a 1994 NOVA documentary, the Righlers said they assumed the foster care arrangement was "temporary."

Genie was sent to foster care homes for special needs children, including one that was particularly religious. She immediately regressed.

She was readmitted to Children's Hospital in 1977 for two weeks and was able to describe in sign

language how her foster parents had punished her for vomiting. After that incident, Genie never regained her speech.

Again, she was thrown into foster care, some of it abusive, according to Curtiss and UCLA's archival data on her case.

When Genie turned 18 in 1975, just after the study ended, Irene Wiley convinced the court to drop the abuse charges against her, claiming she had also been a victim, and Wiley took custody of Genie for a very short time. According to reports in the Los Angeles Times, Wiley worked as a "domestic servant" and quickly found she could not tend to Genie's needs.

In 1978, after cataract surgery, Wiley again petitioned for custody and obtained legal guardianship of her daughter, but by then Genie had been placed in an adult care home. No one has released the name of the facility, and the private foundation that supports her care would not give out the information.

### **Mother Sues Team**

In 1979, Wiley filed a lawsuit against the hospital and her daughter's individual caregivers, alleging they used Genie for "prestige and profit."

The suit was settled in 1984, but the rancor deepened. Curtiss, who had continued to work with Genie on a volunteer basis, was banned from visiting her. Meanwhile, the Riglers reconnected with Irene Wiley.

"I was banned from seeing her and was prevented from explaining to her why," said Curtiss. "Genie had so many losses, and here she was losing the one person who had remained in her life ever since I met her."

### **h4>Rift Affects Authors, Filmmakers**

Russ Rymer, author of the 1993 book "Genie: An Abused Child's Flight From Silence," acknowledged the arguments between researchers affected those who tried to tell her story.

"I am still scarred by the tragedy," Rymer told ABCNEWS.com. "The tremendous rift complicated my reporting. That was also part of the breakdown that turned her treatment into such a tragedy."

Harry Bromley-Davenport, whose self-described "sentimental film "Mockingbird Don't Sing" told the story from Curtiss' point of view, spent two years researching the case, including 40 hours of interviews with Curtiss.

"Susie is the only absolute angel in this whole horrifying saga," Bromley-Davenport said. "She is an extraordinary person.

"The greatest tragedy was Genie being abandoned after all the attention," he said. "She disappointed the scientists, and they all folded their tent and left when the money went away -- all except Susie."

### **What Has Become of Genie**

Today, none of the people who spoke openly to ABCNEWS.com know what happened to Genie.

"I have spent the last 20 years looking for her," said Curtiss. "I can get as far as the social worker in

charge of her case, but I can't get any farther."

But one person who has researched Genie's life told ABCNEWS.com that he had located her through a private detective about eight years ago. That person, who wishes to remain anonymous, said that at that time, around the year 2000, Genie was living in a privately run facility for six to eight mentally underdeveloped adults.

"I got ahold of the accounts of her expenditures -- things like a bathing suit, a towel, a hula hoop or a Walkman," he said. "It was a little pathetic. But she was happy."

Kelly Weedon, a 23-year-old student at the University of Greenwich in Britain, has spent eight months researching the case for her English dissertation. She is flying to Los Angeles in June to view the special collections at UCLA, where Genie's story is encased in 37 feet of boxes that hold medical records, videotapes and legal files, as well as Genie's artwork.

Weedon is studying to be a special education teacher and has forged relationships with most of the players in Genie's drama.

"I truly believe that all the doctors who worked with Genie did the best they possibly could," Weedon told ABCNEWS.com. "But it was charged with emotion. In the end, they were crucified for it. But they would have been crucified, whatever they did."

In her meticulous research, Weedon learned Genie's real name and, "without too much more investigation" could find her -- but has decided against it.

"It wouldn't be fair," she said. "It would be too invasive, and she isn't the same little girl when the stories were written about her. I wouldn't do it -- for her sake and her memory."

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