

Abused teen-ager becomes 'MILLION-DOLLAR KID'

Priscilla Trepanier was one of Minnesota's most incorrigible — and expensive — juvenile delinquents. But with help from corrections workers, she is overcoming her past.



"I'm bored — I'm bored because you're with the same people every day," Priscilla Trepanier, 17, says of school. "I go to learn, that's about it. But I'll finish school and go to college." With help from a restorative justice program, the high school student from St. Cloud, Minn., is overcoming years of abuse, both physical and mental, and a host of other troubles.

FIRST OF TWO PARTS

The sexual assaults on Priscilla Trepanier nearly always took place when her parents went to weekend house parties or on bar-hopping forays.

Often, Priscilla, a young girl with fashion-model looks and a post-no child should endure, sacrificed her body and soul at the hands of an older half brother to spare a younger sister the same fate. Most times, she was successful.

"It was like an everyday

thing," the 17-year-old St. Cloud, Minn., high school student recalls of the abuse. "I didn't want her to get hurt. I would tell him, 'Do whatever you need to do to me and leave her alone.'"

What happened to Priscilla inside that household and later at a juvenile facility where she was allegedly raped four years ago, gave rise to one of Minnesota's most incorrigible and problematic female juvenile delinquents. Quick-tempered and mercenary, she became what one juvenile justice worker calls a

million-dollar kid "a reference to the amount of money counties and the state can pay for detaining and rehabilitating chronic offenders."

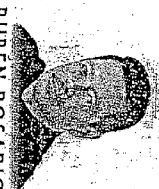
But what has happened to her in the past year, with help from a restorative justice program established by criminal justice innovators, gives hope for the ultimate task of dealing with female offenders.

She was feisty, rebellious, defiant and, pound for pound, I

JEAN FLEM, PIONEER PRESS

"I go to learn, that's about it. But I'll finish school and go to college."

the high school student from St. Cloud.



RUBEN ROSARIO

Pioneer Press Columnist

On Page 8A: Facts on female offenders; places to learn more and places to find help

Pa 1 of 4

would put her up against anyone," says her niece other, Alvin Lawrence. "She had a huge chip on her shoulder."

Today, Trepanier seems to have turned a corner. She has been drug- and trouble-free for nearly a year and a much-in-demand speaker at schools and juvenile justice training sessions and seminars. She credits many people for the turnaround, but singles out peacemaking circles, a restorative justice staple, for lifting the fog from a self-destructive lifestyle.

Although their numbers are relatively low in Minnesota, chronic female juvenile offenders are a growing problem nationwide. Between 1992 and 1996, juvenile females arrested for serious violent crimes rose by 25 percent, significantly higher than their male counterparts. Arrests have declined more recently but remain well above the rate from two decades ago.

Because most of their offenses are intrinsically linked to their victimization, female offenders present unique challenges to a justice system whose incarceration and treatment policies have traditionally been designed for boys. In response, Minnesota's Department of Corrections this year unveiled a six-year plan for cost-effective, gender-specific programming.

State-committed girls cost taxpayers \$175 to \$185 a day the price of a fine hotel room, their male counterparts at the juvenile correctional facility in Red Wing come a little cheaper — about \$186.

The gender difference among juvenile offenders is striking. Boys generally tend to lash out. Girls tend to implode, with external displays more a cry for help.

Priscilla embodied a volatile partnership of both behaviors. Research indicates young female delinquents hurt themselves by abusing drugs, prostituting their bodies, starving or even mutilating themselves. The self-destructive process, if left unchecked, is mostly passed on to their own children.

"There are people who need to be locked up, and I wish money weren't an issue with society but it is," says Connie Schultiz, Priscilla's clinical social worker. "I wish we didn't have to spend a half-million dollars to get a kid in need a kidney. Does that mean I don't give him the kidney? We should look at young people like Priscilla in much the same light. There's a good soul in there worth fighting for."

Priscilla is willing to tell her story — the Pioneer Press typically does not name victims of sexual assault — in hopes of helping other girls. Her story provides insight into the makings of a female juvenile delinquent and the cycle of family violence that is often passed down like an heirloom from one generation to another.

ABUSE AND ICE CREAM

Priscilla, the oldest daughter of Joyce and Kenneth Trepanier, was born in St. Cloud but grew up on the La Courte Ouelles Indian Reservation in northwestern Wisconsin near Hayward. Her 47-year-old mother acknowledges that domestic life inside the tan three-bedroom ranch home near the Chippewa River was dysfunctional.

"Alcohol basically destroyed my family," says Joyce Trepanier, an attendant at the OK House, a 72-hour juvenile holding facility on the state prison grounds in St. Cloud. "Kenny was an alcoholic. When he drank, he was very abusive. When he didn't, he was a fantasist the guy."

Priscilla adored her father, a horse painter who died from a heart attack last year. She prefers to remember the man who took her to Dairy Queen for ice cream and cruised around the reservation with her, looking for garage sales.

But her childhood memories are mostly a montage of violent spats, police calls and loud late-night parties that kept her from sleeping on school nights. The most dominant image was the sexual abuse.

Her half brother, five years her senior, was physically abused by his stepfather, according to Priscilla and their mother and other relatives. The boy repeated, the abuse on his younger siblings when he was left in charge of the household while his parents were out, his mother says.

The attacks, mostly sexual in nature, also included having her head slammed against walls and being tossed down a flight of stairs. Sometimes the assaults were at the hands of her brother's neighborhood friends.

After five years of abuse, then-10-year-old Priscilla summoned the courage to roll in 1986. But her mother's response was to build a wall between them, in some of which remains standing: Joyce expressed assent.

"It wasn't that I didn't believe her," Joyce explains. "There was no excuse for what my son did, and I was horrified at it. But I guess I was more fearful of what would happen to my son when Kenny found out about it. I needed time to think of how best to handle it."

The day after telling her

mother, Priscilla told her favorite teacher at Hayward Elementary School. Police and social workers were notified, and her brother was removed from the home that afternoon. He spent a year at a treatment center for juvenile sex offenders, according to his mother. The family crisis fueled more drinking and more domestic abuse, culminating one night when Joyce said her husband put a knife to her throat as Priscilla looked on helplessly. For Joyce, it was time to leave.

Joyce, too, grew up in an abusive home — on a farm in Hartford, Vt., about 90 minutes northwest of Milwaukee. Her mother, a battered woman, also tried to leave, one night in 1987. Joyce's father fatally ran her mother down in his pickup as Joyce's mother and her mother's oldest son were walking to a store to call police. That boy escaped serious injuries, but Joyce's 10-year-old brother who was the pickup, was killed when the impact hurled him through the windshield. The father spent about three years in prison. Joyce went to live with relatives.

Decades later, when Joyce left her own husband, she moved to the St. Cloud area with her three daughters and divorced Kenneth. She may have solved one problem, but others lay ahead.

VICTIM TO BULLY

Schoolyard fights became frequent for Priscilla, and there were times she locked her teachers out of their classrooms, only to be found curled up on the floor.

"I was just so jealous of them because they were having a good time," Priscilla says of the children — she assaulted in schoolyards. "I guess I reacted that way because I'd seen it through my dad beating up on my mom all the time."

Priscilla's transformation from victim to school bully led to a four-year series of placements and lockups that would test the patience and resolve of many who crossed her path. Her first placement occurred after she assaulted a Sauk Rapids, Minn., middle-school classmate, and then trashed a car belonging to the victim's father.

"I carved my initials on it and threw eggs at it," she says. She was sent to a group home in Ballard at 12 but was kicked out after she beat up another resident and stole her clothes. She was sent to another group home in Becker, Minn., where she assaulted a staff member.

pg 3 of 4

That's when authorities asked Lawrence to help. A Ben- lon County, Minn., probation officer for 28 years, Lawrence runs his own juvenile diversion program and has seen all kinds of troubled kids.

Priscilla was "one of the most rebellious kids I've ever had," he said. "She walked around waiting for something to happen, like, 'Make my day, and I'll punch you out.'"

Lawrence approved her transfer to the Archdeacon Gillman Center in Bemidji, Minn., a juvenile residential treatment facility operated by the Episcopal Church.

Priscilla ran away, one time stealing a car with another girl, and crashing into a building in Bemidji. After a lockup period, she would be sent back with fingers crossed. She says she was raped toward the end of her yearlong stint at the facility, an incident she would keep secret until this year. The allegation is now the focus of a criminal probe.

When it happened, "I just lost all trust in the system," she says. "I just played the program from then on." No, sir. "Yes, sir."

Finally, after getting kicked out of a girls' ranch in Benson, Minn., Priscilla pleaded with Lawrence to send her home. Lawrence relented. The home- moon period, as he calls it, last- ed a few months. Priscilla began hanging out with hard-core dealers of crack, the street name for methamphetamine, and spending her time and money "weaving" on the drug and stealing from her mother to support her new habit.

Lawrence placed her under house arrest after she failed a random drug test. Priscilla bolted to Milwaukee, where police found her inside a drug crash- house. She was sent back to Minnesota after a stay at a juve- nile detox center.

Lawrence had run out of options.

"When you get a kid so out of control you know that they are really hurting justice," he says. "Priscilla needed to come to terms with her victimization, her behavior, her conflicting emo- tions with both her parents, her drug addiction and an eating dis- order and none of the traditional programs had worked."

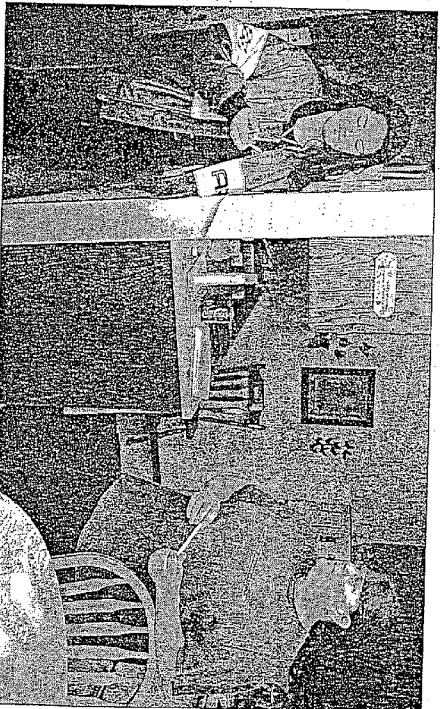
He called Paula Schaefer, director of the Department of Corrections, female-offender planning unit, and he told her what he thought Priscilla needed.

Schaefer described an upstart restorative justice pro- gram. But that would mean transferring custody of Priscilla from the county to state correc- tions, and, that, Lawrence knew well, was the final step before prison.

Priscilla's case files about 15 inches thick rested on his desk. They contained the paper trail of a tormented soul. He had awak- ened many mornings thinking more about this girl than his own daughters. He knew deep down that Priscilla needed heal- ing, not correction.

Should he take the gamble of placing this kid on the pathway to prison? "Do it," he said, over the phone.

PRISCILLA'S MOTHER, JOYCE, is in a room at the Archdeacon Gillman Center in Bemidji, Minn. She is wearing a dark jacket and a white shirt. She is looking down at a document on a table. A man in a white shirt is standing next to her, looking at the document. The room has a window with blinds and a chair.



After signing tax forms in the late afternoon, Priscilla Trepanier plans to go out, which prompts her mother, Joyce, to ask her where she plans to go.



PIONEER PRESS PHOTOS BY JEAN RI
Priscilla Trepantier, 17, meets with her parole officer, Alan Lawrence. "She was feisty, rebellious, defiant and, pound for pound, I would put her up against anyone," Lawrence said of the Priscilla he first came to know. "She had a huge chip on her shoulder."

Priscilla's breakthrough X

A peacemaking circle, a restorative justice practice modeled on an Indian custom, helps a troubled teen begin to heal



RUBEN ROSARIO
Pioneer Press Columnist

Online: To learn more, go to www.restorativejustice.com and select "Restorative Justice" from the dropdown menu.

arranged in a circle for all to see, were an attempt to get

people to speak from the heart, Trepanier wrote. "Trust"

— among the many things

ripped from her childhood.

On this day in early 2001,

the 16-year-old Trepanier

chose to lower the walls she

had built around herself.

Sobbing openly, she spent

two hours expressing the

hurt raging inside her. She

spoke about the anger at her

RUBEN ROSARIO, SA

SECOND OF TWO PARTS

Even after years of sexual

molestation and a rape,

this moment in Priscilla

Trepanier's young life.

Sitting in a small commu-

ty room in Hinckley, Minn.,

she was surrounded by 12 peo-

ple — parents, other family

members, her high school

counselor, her parole officer.

Each had written on a paper

plate the personal trait they

valued most. The plates,



JEAN PEARL, PIONEER PRESS

St. Cloud 17-year-old Priscilla Trepanier, seated, is close to her 16-year-old sister, Reeghan. They live with their mother and their younger sister.

Pg 1 of 3

19 July 2013

Rubén Rosario

(continued)

halfbrother who molested her and the love-one she felt for her mother. She recalled the family violence and the residue of drug abuse, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder that ruled her thoughts and emotions.

It was the first time some in the room had heard the details. They knew of the drug abuse, the juvenile delinquency and the violent behavior and the defiant attitude. Now they understood and pledged their support.

It was quite emotional," recalls Kanya Goodenough Gordon, a restorative justice planner who organized the session. "It seemed by the end, everyone was in tears. I believe Priscilla came away from it realizing that people did care about her, that she wasn't an abysmal failure."

From the age of 12, the 17-year-old St. Cloud girl had spent all but several months in nearly a dozen group homes and juvenile detention facilities in Minnesota. Years of being in a dysfunctional home where she was repeatedly sexually molested and where she repeatedly witnessed other family violence, had turned a wispy girl with the flowing black hair into an obstinate, drug-abusing delinquent. A recently disclosed alleged rape in late 1998 at one of the detention facilities — the subject of an ongoing criminal probe — cemented her mistrust and rebellions streak.

If Priscilla succeeds in turning that binge around, the circle in Hinckley will have been the starting point.

Messali Academy in Butte, Minn., seemed like the last step before prison on Priscilla's self-destructive journey in the late fall of 2009, just another place for her to play the program game while she plotted ways to escape. Even the threat of incarceration didn't faze her.

"They were all pretty much the same," she says now. "Talking down. Anger management and drug awareness classes. I already knew what this (drug) stuff does. But I said to myself that I wasn't going to change until I wanted to change."

Messali, a privately run juvenile facility, which the state contracted to house Tremper and four other of the state's most chronic and serious female juvenile offenders, wasn't the difference, Priscilla says. But when the state contracted to bring peace-making circles to the girls, it made all the difference.

"They changed my life," she says simply.

"It was quite emotional. It seemed by the end, everyone was in tears. I believe Priscilla came away from it realizing that people did care about her, that she wasn't an abysmal failure."

KANYA GOODENOUGH GORDON

On the first peace-making circle session attended by Priscilla Tremper, her family and her counselors.

AMIGOS, a Twin Cities-based nonprofit that works with juvenile and adult offenders after release, was hired to develop a "relationship basket, gender-specific" program for the state-committed girls. The project adopted the restorative justice principle, which relies heavily on family and community involvement.

"The answer is in the community, not the facility," says Louise Wolfram, AMIGOS president. "Besides dealing with her victimization and long-standing chronic issues and taking ownership and apologizing for her behavior, we also have to develop a family and support system or we are not going to have any impact on her."

Peace-making circles — a custom found in American Indian tribes and other indigenous cultures — bring together community members and the most important or influential people in a victim's or offender's life. Members, sitting in a circle and passing a "talking piece" that gives them the floor to speak, are encouraged to talk frankly about their feelings and thoughts without retribution. A circle keeper acts as a facilitator, making sure that a safe and respectful environment is maintained. The goal is to give offenders the opportunity to atone for their behavior and encourage participants to pledge their support to help the person come back into the community.

CIRCLES OF LIFE

It was Priscilla who initiated circles after that first encounter in Hinckley.

Another emotional one was had weeks later with her American Indian parental family at the Lac Courte Oreilles Reservation near Hayward, Wis. A third involved her drug-abusing peers at the YMCA at the St. Cloud Technical College. Of the six invited, two showed up.

"I had introduced some of them to my dealers, and I felt really bad because they got hooked pretty bad," she says. "I

wanted to let them know that I no longer wanted to remain friends or hang with them if they did drugs. It was hard, but you have to sever that tie."

Her father's unexpected death a year ago was another turning point. He had expressed a desire to stop drinking just days earlier, and had bought a pontoon boat to take her fishing. Crying softly, as she lay in her father's bedroom after the funeral, Priscilla vowed to change.

"Praddy, I need to break the cycle," she said to him in her thoughts. "This whole time I could have been with you. Instead, I had to get into trouble."

The most dramatic and unexpected of circles took place with her molester, her estranged 22-year-old half-brother. It was held in her mother's apartment in Sauk Rapids, Minn.

"I just want to let you know that I forgive you, that I still love you and that I don't hate you," Priscilla told her brother that day. "But I also want to let you know that what happened ruined my life."

"The brother responded that he was sorry about what he did and wished that it had never happened," recalls Goodenough Gordon. "Then there was literally a sign that came out of him, like all the years of guilt coming out. It did a lot to help her in the healing process."

Priscilla has been living with her mother since she was discharged from Messali last June — the longest she has been home in five years. Although struggling slightly with one or two courses, Priscilla is doing well in school. She is interested in becoming a police or probation officer and plans to attend college.

"It's been a long, long road and I've done more praying in the last four or five years than I've done my whole life," says Priscilla's mother, Joyce. "She used to be so mean, a tough cookie, but it's been a big big change. I'm proud of her."

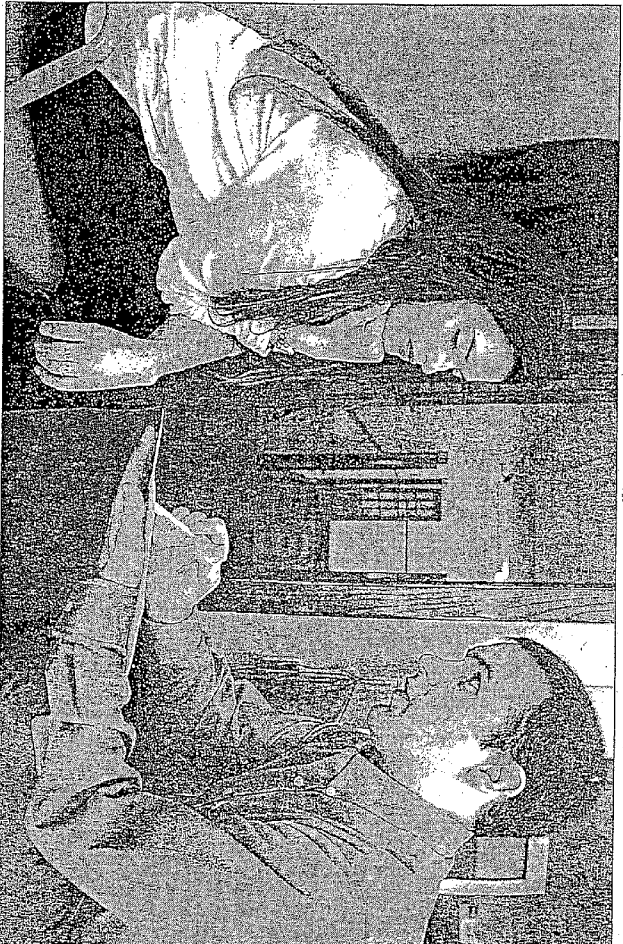
Parole officer Alan Lawrence still wants to keep her "on paper" until she shows progress with an eating disorder that is keeping her rail-thin and endangering her health. Other than that, "she is doing very, very well," he says.

Like a recovering alcoholic, Priscilla says she understands that she has to take it one day at a time. She wants to counsel younger kids and continue speaking to cops, judges, and those in the juvenile justice and corrections professions about her experiences.

"What I learned out of all of this is that you can change and don't have to be a bad person," Priscilla says. "Shocking with bad groups of people and not choosing friends wisely is a bad idea. And if you are abused and someone you can trust and tell them anything and everything."

Rubén Rosario can be reached at rosario@pioneerpress.com or (651) 228-5154.

Pg 3 of 3



Priscilla's school counselor, Saint Nordby, discusses with her the classes she needs to graduate from high school. She is interested in becoming a police or probation officer and plans to attend college.

JEAN PERU, PIONEER PRESS



A family photograph shows Priscilla Trepanier with her father, Kenneth, who died last year of a heart attack. It was after his burial that Priscilla vowed to change. "Daddy, I need to break the cycle," she said to him in her thoughts. "This whole time I could have been with you. Instead, I had to get into trouble."