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WIFE ABUSE NO LONGER A PRIVATE CRIME

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Harley Nettles can still feel her husband's fists pounding on her skull two years after she fired two bullets through his heart.

During a recent interview, her face was twisted with pain and she clutched her head with her hands as she told the story of that night.

Ms. Nettles, 35, continues to experience nightmares about the beatings that were a routine part of life with her husband, Ronald, 36. "I feel he still has his hands on me," Ms. Nettles said. "Fear dominated my life with Ronald.

"The abuse affects you mentally when you relive it because it was very painful and heart-breaking."

Ms. Nettles wiped tears off her cheeks when she recalled telling her daughter, Angela, now 3, why she had shot her daddy.

"I told her I had to shoot him because he was a bad daddy," Ms. Nettles said.

Angela does not realize her father is dead, Ms. Nettles said. She thinks he is at work.

A Lexington County jury found Ms. Nettles not guilty of murder April 12 after deliberating for 2 1/2 hours.

The verdict in conservative Lexington County stunned Nancy Barton, executive director of the private, non-profit Sistercare organization. Sistercare shelters and counsels abused women and their children in Richland and Lexington counties.

"In the women's movement, we saw the verdict in the Nettles case as a progressive step," Ms. Barton said. "More and more people are talking about violence in the home with an intolerant tone."

But, Ms. Barton said, the 100 women inmates Sistercare counsels in prison, where they are doing time for killing their abusive husbands, show that injustices still can occur.

She said people do not understand that some of the worst violence in America occurs in the home. Ms. Barton said some husbands keep coffins in their homes -- a not-so-subtle reminder

about the consequences of disobeying their commands.

"Many abused women feel like a dog or a slave," Ms. Barton said. "Mentally, they are prisoners of war who see few options."

Ms. Nettles testified that she shot her husband in self-defense after he threatened to kill her and Angela on the night of May 2, 1989.

She said the attacks by Nettles, her husband of four years, included being whipped with coat hangers, body-slammed, kicked in the side while pregnant and choked.

Ms. Nettles said her husband frequently stumbled home in drunken rages and used her as a punching bag to build his sense of power.

She said the reign of terror ended after Nettles came home drunk. He was upset she had gone to see her sister, she said.

With her daughter in her left arm, Ms. Nettles said she grabbed a .38- caliber revolver and shot her husband twice as he tried to get a knife from a dish drainer in the kitchen of their mobile home at 1728 Fish Hatchery Road.

Ms. Nettles' attorney, **Jack B. Swerling** of Columbia, said her experience is similar to those of six other abused wives he successfully has defended on murder charges since 1980.

Swerling said men who beat their wives are obsessed with control. He said they cannot live with someone who shows any signs of independence.

Ms. Nettles said her beatings were a hot topic in barroom conversations involving her husband, who worked in a warehouse for a building supply company.

She said she stayed with her husband despite the abuse because she had quit her job as a meat wrapper in a St. Andrews food store to care for Angela. She said she could not have returned to the job anyway.

"I would be too slow, because you had to memorize meat prices, and the beatings meant my mind was no longer a great memory bank," Ms. Nettles said.

Ms. Nettles is still unemployed, living on Social Security payments, but she hopes to become a model. She said she does not have any job offers.

She said her priority is to get psychological counseling for her daughter to ensure that she gets a chance to excel in school and avoid the dependence trap she fell into.

"I'll tell Angela to get out of a relationship the first time someone hits her," Ms. Nettles said. "I'll teach her to be an independent person."

Swerling and Ms. Nettles said the outcome of her trial would have been different 10 or 15 years ago, when abused wives were criticized for not leaving their husbands.

Today, people recognize that spouse abuse creates such a state of fear that the person being

abused does not believe he or she can leave a relationship, Ms. Nettles and **Swerling** said.

Swerling said many laws that shielded abusive spouses from prosecution have been repealed after two decades of demands for sexual equality.

He said women's access to the jury box, first opened to South Carolina women in the mid-1960s, also has led to a greater intolerance of spouse abuse. Seven of the 12 jurors who decided Ms. Nettles' fate were women.

"Historically, a lot of women were abused, but it was never talked about," **Swerling** said. "Today, it's rare to find a jury where a woman has not suffered beatings or does not know someone who has experienced abuse."

A 47-year-old woman, who shot her estranged, abusive husband in July 1981, said she has few friends because people blame her for the killing even though she was found not guilty of murder.

Neighbors shied away when they saw her outside her home, said the woman, who asked that her name not be used. They were afraid she might shoot them.

The woman said former friends believed she should have put up with the abuse, which included a broken nose, gunshot wounds in the leg and fractured ribs. She said her husband, a clerk with the U.S. Postal Service, beat her throughout their 15-year marriage.

She said reaction to the shooting would have been different today.

"I think people viewed me as a bad person, a criminal," the woman said. "People are less tolerant of spouse abuse now."



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