

1976 FREEWAY GANG RAPE VICTIM WRITES OF CRIME THAT STUNNED DETROIT - ATTACK ALTERED, BUT DIDN'T RUIN, HER LIFE

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At 19, her **rape** became the most publicized sexual assault in Detroit history. Now, 28 years later, she has written a book.

The story of the woman kidnapped from the Lodge **Freeway** and **gang** raped for 12 hours continues to haunt generations of metro Detroiters.

But Melissa McCormick is living her life free of fear.

McCormick's book, "The Queen's Daughter," (Walkerville Publishing) hit Canadian bookstores Thursday. It is a simply told, painfully graphic account of an attack that so disturbed then-Gov. William Milliken, that in **1976** , he ordered State Police to patrol Michigan's **freeways** , which they still do.

Earlier this week McCormick, 47, sat in her publisher's office, breaking years of silence as she talked about the struggle to put her story onto paper. She talked about eliminating fear from her life, the absence of anger and, surprisingly, the sympathy she feels for the men who caused her decades of pain.

In high school, McCormick was a perfect student. She earned good grades, played the violin and led her class on the student council.

She was one of five children, born to strict Serbian parents who were proud of their heritage and taught the importance of religion and hard work.

But what McCormick longed for was freedom.

After graduating from high school in 1974, McCormick took a job at a downtown Windsor nightclub called the Top Hat.

She worked the lunch and dinner shifts six days a week. She focused all of her attention on working and saving money. And within a year she'd saved enough to move out of her parents' home and into a small Windsor apartment.

Every day on the bus to work, McCormick passed an American Motors dealership. A bubble-shaped car called the Pacer caught McCormick's eye and soon, she owned a bright yellow version. It was yet another step toward adulthood.

Growing up in Windsor, McCormick came to love the city across the river. She enjoyed Motown music, Detroit restaurants and the shops along Woodward Avenue.

"I remember feeling such excitement walking among the crowds of people on the streets," McCormick recalled in her book. "Sometimes as a joke, I would pretend I was Marlo Thomas, from the TV show 'That Girl,' and I would throw my hat in the air and mess up my hair just like she did at the beginning of every show."

She had Thursdays off, and it was common for McCormick and her friends to cross the border into Detroit for a night of dinner and dancing.

That was exactly the plan on Feb. 12, **1976** .

That night

McCormick dressed in a black, polka-dotted pantsuit. The top dipped in the front and tied in the back. The pants flowed loosely around her thighs. She slipped her feet into 4-inch heels and completed the look with a coat of white rabbit fur.

McCormick's yellow Pacer could not accommodate her five girlfriends so they took two cars. They ate at Joe Muer's, a popular seafood restaurant frequented by Detroit politicians and celebrities.

After dinner, the group went north to a Southfield disco called the Landing. At about 11 p.m., McCormick decided to head home early.

Alone in her car, McCormick steered her Pacer south on the Lodge **Freeway** . She was near Linwood, only 10 minutes from the tunnel, when her tire went flat. She pulled over to take a look.

Within minutes, a Good Samaritan named Freddy Bennett from Detroit pulled over and helped change her tire. He was placing the flat in her trunk when a black Cadillac pulled to a stop in front of McCormick's car.

A group of men walked over and pushed a gun into McCormick's waist. They took her coat, jewelry, wallet and car keys. And they forced her toward their Cadillac.

Bennett was tossed into the trunk of McCormick's car, which the **gang** of men drove away. Bennett was eventually shoved from the car somewhere in Detroit. He immediately contacted police.

Back on the **freeway** , McCormick struggled to free herself and ran into the **freeway** traffic. One of the men reached for the sash of her blouse, tearing it and exposing her chest.

She screamed for help, cars swerved to avoid hitting her, but no one stopped.

She didn't get far before a fist hammered down on her face and everything went black.

When McCormick woke, she was in the front seat of the moving Cadillac between two men.

Several other men were in the back seat.

Her bra was undone and hands were groping her from every direction.

They took her to an apartment in a Detroit neighborhood that was unfamiliar to her. They threw her on a bed, ripped her clothes off and held a gun to her head.

The men argued over who would **rape** her first. And for the next 12 hours, at least seven men took turns assaulting her.

The next morning

The next morning, the men let McCormick drive away in her own car.

Police sitting in a cruiser only two blocks away knew almost immediately who McCormick was. She looked disheveled, her face was swollen and bruised from the beating. Her clothes were torn and her heel was broken.

Police had been searching for McCormick throughout the night after receiving Bennett's report of the kidnapping.

She was taken to a Detroit police station for questioning, and her family arrived to drive her back to Windsor where she was examined by a doctor.

Four days later, McCormick returned to Detroit. Police had worked around the clock on her case and had eight suspects in custody. She identified all of her attackers.

During the trial, McCormick carefully described everything that happened. She remembered details about each man and exactly how they attacked her.

She told jurors that the ignorance of her attackers saved her from having to perform oral sex. The only thing the men knew about Canada was that it was ruled by a queen. They presumed McCormick was royalty. They called her the queen's daughter and said royalty shouldn't have to do that.

The trial was laced with racial tension. Observers in Detroit accused her of acting on a white woman's fantasy of having sex with black men.

In Windsor, she was criticized for dressing in a flashy way the night of her **rape**. She was judged for moving from her parents' home unmarried and at such a young age. People said she was asking for trouble by simply visiting Detroit.

"What got me through the lineups and the trial and the awful things people said about me was that if I didn't come forward this could happen to someone else," McCormick said.

Within the year, one of McCormick's attackers was found guilty of **rape** by a jury. Five other men pleaded guilty to charges of sexual assault while the seventh man charged waived his rights to a jury trial and was later cleared.

Living ever after

McCormick said she forgave her attackers long ago. In fact, she wishes them well.

"I'm not a vengeful person," she said. "If I harbored anger and resentment after all these years, I wouldn't be a good person myself. What happened to me is regretful, but I'm not going to live my life resenting something I had no control over."

Still, it was not easy for her to let go of the shame, fear and self-blame she felt after the **rape** .

McCormick has fought depression and suicidal thoughts, nightmares and addiction to Valium and painkillers. She stopped believing in God for a time. She was terrified to drive at night and refused to return to Detroit unaccompanied. She was mired in self-pity until her sister, Zorka, challenged her to live again.

McCormick recalled Zorka's words in her book: "You're alive Melissa! You didn't die -- so pull yourself together and start living!"

McCormick turned to countless therapy sessions and a library of self-help books. She studied religion and reconnected with her Catholic roots. And she began to live as normal a life as she knew how.

Today, McCormick owns a business that sells artificial flowers and trees. She is a board member at a sexual assault crisis center, and a twice-divorced mother of three.

She has a cheery disposition and said she is so content, she couldn't ask for anything more out of her life.

McCormick claims that her love for Detroit has not faltered. And she now visits the city on social outings, most recently lunching at Sweet Georgia Brown near Greektown.

For the past 27 years, the anniversary of her attack was marked by depression, McCormick said.

But this year was different.

This year, the story of her attack lives in the pages of a book. And at last, McCormick said, she is free. To contact McCormick or order "The Queen's Daughter," go to www.queensdaughter.com.

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(SIDEBAR)

THREE OF SEVEN ATTACKERS STILL IN PRISON

What became of the seven men charged in the sexual assault of Melissa McCormick:

- * Joe Evans, then 22, was sentenced to two life terms. He is serving his sentence in a Detroit prison.
- * Frank Heard, then 18, was sentenced to 15-40 years in prison. He was paroled in 1983 and discharged from parole two years later.
- * Marcus Robinson, then 17, was given a life sentence. He is serving his sentence in a Detroit prison.
- * Melvin Dalton, then 19, is serving his life sentence in a Macomb County prison.
- * A then 16-year-old was sentenced as an adult for 10-30 years. He finished his parole in 1984.
- * A then 15-year-old was under the authority of the Wayne County Juvenile Court. The Michigan Department of Corrections did not have record of his whereabouts.
- * Ordell Walker, then 23, was cleared of the **rape** charge.

SOURCE: The Michigan Department of Corrections

Caption: Photo ERIC SEALS/Detroit Free Press

In **1976** , Melissa McCormick of Windsor was kidnapped and **gang** raped, but she has moved on: "I'm not going to live my life resenting something I had no control over." In February **1976** , Melissa McCormick was a 19-year-old Windsor woman who was kidnapped and raped by at least seven men for 12 hours. Today, she says she lives without fear. She is a business owner and mother of three -- her son Michael is at left -- and still lives in Windsor. In February **1976** , Melissa McCormick was a 19-year-old Windsor woman who was kidnapped and raped by at least seven men for 12 hours. Today, she says she lives without fear. She is a business owner and mother of three -- her son Michael is at left -- and still lives in Windsor.

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