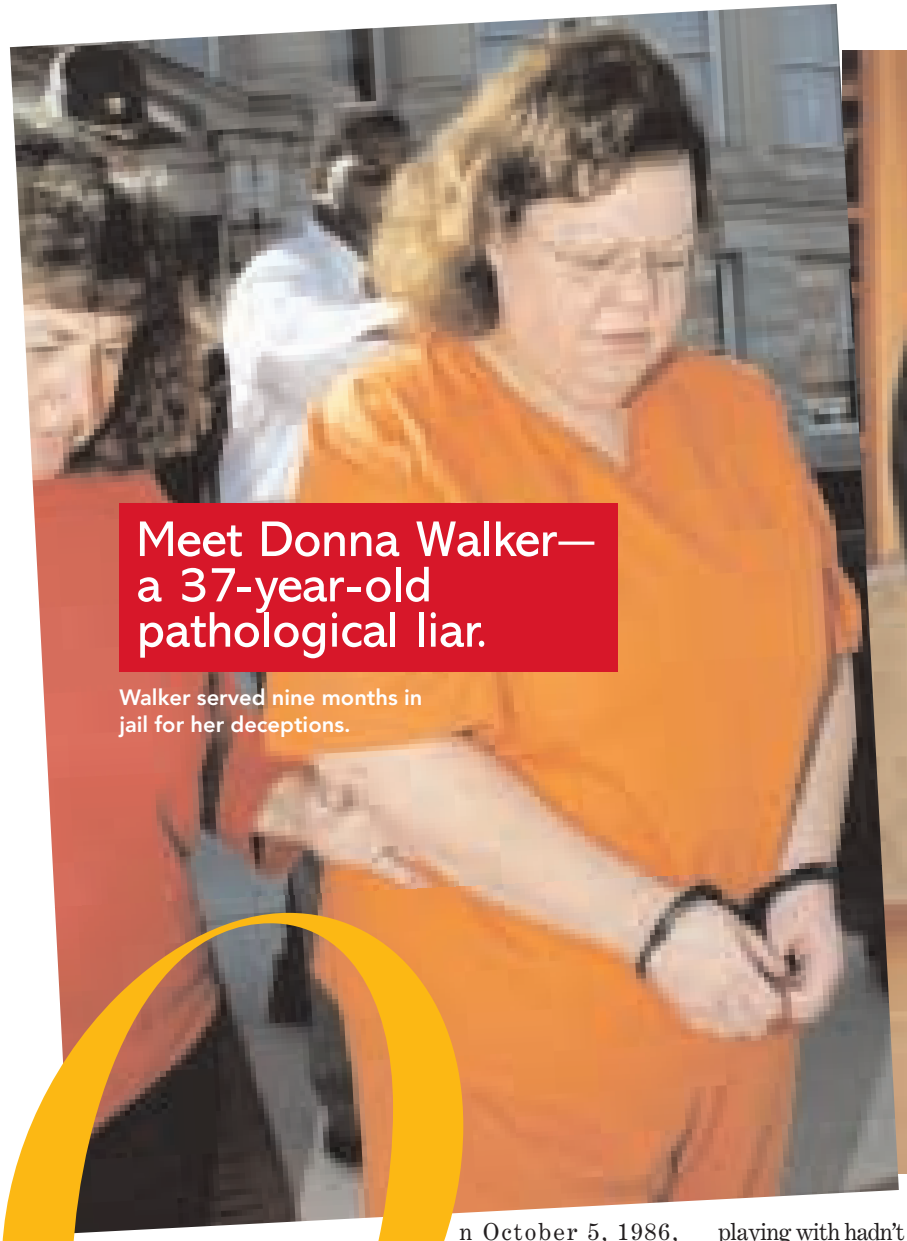
Portrait



Meet Donna Walker—a 37-year-old pathological liar.

Walker served nine months in jail for her deceptions.

On October 5, 1986, Dorothy Sherrill walked outside her home in Thorntown, Indiana—a community of 1,500 people tucked inside bending cornfields—to ask her daughter, Shannon, who was playing in the street, what she wanted for lunch. The Sherrills lived on a lane of single-wide trailers that bordered a large field, beyond which lay a cemetery. Shannon said she wanted peanut butter.

Ten minutes later, Sherrill went outside to give the six-year-old her sandwich. But there was no Shannon. The kids she'd been playing with hadn't noticed her disappearance. Nor had the neighbors. Within hours scores of volunteers were combing the area in precise lines, looking for clues. Undersides of trailers were examined. Wells were searched. A helicopter with a thermal imaging device was borrowed from a nearby naval base to search for the 40-pound girl's body heat. Shannon was never found.

After 17 years—on Saturday, July 26, 2003—Sherrill was still not over the loss. But at least her home had the sound of a child in it again. Her son, David, had recently had a baby with his girlfriend. Sherrill was cleaning up toys when the phone rang.

"Is this the Sherrill family?" a soft voice asked.

"Who is this?" said Sherrill.

"I think I'm your daughter, Shannon."

WALKER: AP PHOTO/JOHN HARRELL

By Shaun Assael Photographs by Coral von Zumwalt

# of a liar

She convinced this couple she was pregnant with a baby for them to adopt...

David and Amy McDaniels

...and pretended to be this woman's daughter, missing for 17 years. Why? A story of hope and cruelty.

Dorothy Sherrill's daughter, Shannon, disappeared in 1986.

Sherrill could barely speak. "Please don't do this to me," she pleaded. "If you're playing, it's not funny."

The caller insisted it was no joke. Her name was Beth Anne Harris, she said. She was a married mother of two from Virginia Beach, Virginia, and she'd recently begun dealing in therapy with an abusive past. She was having flashbacks of being abducted as a child, she told Sherrill, leading her to believe that the parents who raised her weren't her real ones. She was also having visions of the number 607—the address on Sherrill's old trailer. To investigate her past, she explained, she'd started researching old missing-child cases.

"I think I could be your daughter," she said.

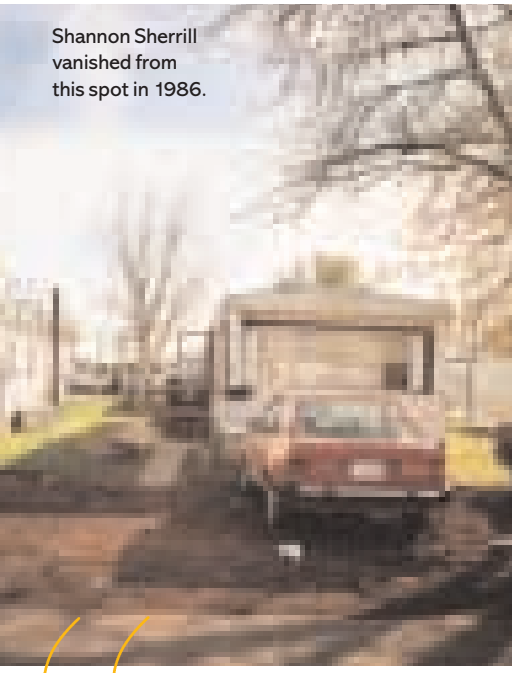
Thorntown's marshal, Jeff Woodard, was sound asleep when he got a call that Sherrill was outside her trailer, screaming, "Someone please help me! Shannon's on the phone. She's alive!" Woodard grabbed the file he still kept on the Sherrill case and headed into the night. Sherrill's street was buzzing when he arrived. All the lights were on and Shannon's relatives were taking turns on the phone, afraid to let the caller hang up. Beth Anne had already e-mailed photos of herself to Sherrill: a girl in a prom dress; a teen in a nineties haircut; a woman with kids in front of a suburban home. She said she suspected that the parents who raised her had molested her. "Do you think it's really Shannon?" Sherrill asked the marshal.

Woodard wasn't sure, but he knew he wasn't going to solve this one alone. He made a few calls and eventually enlisted the help of a state police detective, Lieutenant Jeff Heck. ➜

Heck tried to nail down the story as fast as possible. He asked Beth Anne to take a DNA test. He asked a Virginia Beach police officer to roll by the address that she'd given. And he tried to make sense of a strange call that had come into the Thorntown police from a husky-voiced woman who claimed that she ran with a "bad crowd" that included Shannon's abductors. "I just spoke with them," the woman said. "They know Beth Anne's talking. She's in danger."

Beth Anne agreed to take a DNA test, then offered a jumble of excuses about why she couldn't. Sherrill was confused; so were the cops. The phone numbers Beth Anne gave didn't work. And when the Virginia Beach police officer arrived at the address she'd given, no one came to the door. By Sunday, her stories were growing bizarre. During one call, she said her mother-abductor was pounding on the door. "She's coming after me," Beth Anne shrieked. Heck urged her to see her local police.

On Monday, a horde of reporters descended on Thorntown: CNN, Fox News, the major networks. But where was Shannon? Sherrill wondered too as she sat in her blue recliner. She thought about all the right answers that Beth Anne had given about Shannon: how she hated pickles as a girl, had a small scar on her stomach, and was diabetic. "I wanted to believe in the worst way," Sherrill says.



Shannon Sherrill vanished from this spot in 1986.

> "Someone help me! Shannon's on the phone. She's alive!"
>
> —DOROTHY SHERRILL ON THE NIGHT DONNA WALKER CALLED HER

The next morning Sherrill was asked to stop by the Thorntown police department. Its cramped two rooms had never seen anything quite like the all-nighter the cops had just pulled. "I was in such a daze. I heard people talking all around me," Sherrill recalls, "but I had no idea what they were saying." What Heck said to her was "There is no Beth Anne, Dorothy. There is no Shannon. This has been a terrible hoax."

Dorothy Sherrill wasn't the only one who was being conned during that last week of July. Thirty miles away, a young Indianapolis couple, narcotics cop David McDaniel and his wife, Amy, were going through a heart-wrenching drama of their own. After exhausting most of their savings with two attempts at in vitro fertilization, the McDaniels had turned to adoption as a last resort. To find a birth mother, they'd written a letter that was posted on Adoption.com. It ran for six pages and began: "We love each other dearly and are happily married. Although we have been able to accomplish most of our dreams and goals, we are still awaiting our ultimate dream, to have a child."

On Saturday, July 26, the same day Beth Anne first contacted Dorothy Sherrill, a woman named Donna phoned the McDaniels from Topeka, Kansas. She said she had read their letter and wanted them to be the parents of her soon-to-be born daughter. Amy had a lump in her throat as they spoke. Donna, it turned out, was just like her: blond, fit, 5'3". When Donna talked to the couple again at nine o'clock that night, she was breathless. "I'm going into labor now," she said.

In their letter on Adoption.com, the McDaniels had described a future with a family "taking walks on a warm, sunny day, listening to neighborhood kids laugh and chatter, playing tag, riding bikes, throwing balls, swinging on swings, and running through neighbors' sprinklers as we go by." That was the life that they wanted prospective birth mothers to imagine—not the one where David went to work at night, busting down doors and leading drug raids. Yet David's experience as a cop seemed to fascinate Donna. When she called Amy early Sunday morning—"Yesterday was a false alarm," she said, "I'm going to the doctor again tomorrow"—she also asked to speak to David. There'd been a break in a missing person's case nearby in Thorntown, she told him. Had he heard about it?

When David said no, he thought he heard a note of disappointment enter into her voice.

Amy spent the rest of the day buying baby clothes and talking with Donna "about religion, whether I'd work, whether the baby would go to day care." But the following morning the McDaniels received some troubling news. Not only had Donna failed to fax her medical records as their Indiana attorney had requested, but the Kansas attorney assisting them on the adoption also came forward to say that he'd been contacted once before by a potential birth mother named Donna, only to have her disappear. He thought this Donna might be the same woman. Even then, Amy refused to yield hope. She couldn't give up on the baby she'd been promised. "You'd never dream that someone would pretend to be pregnant," she says.

On a cool day in October 2004, 37-year-old Donna Walker, the woman responsible for the dashed hopes of Sherrill and the McDaniels, steps into the lobby of a psychiatric home in Topeka. She is dressed in black: paisley blouse, mid-length skirt, tights and soft-soled shoes. At 5'6", she weighs less than the 300 pounds she once did, but her cheeks still swallow her face in folds, burying her eyes and giving them a catlike quality.

"We can't stay here," she says, extending her hand. "We'll distract the others." Before she leaves, she walks to the nurses' station and gets a plastic bag with three pills, a vial of liquid, and a needle. "I have to stay on my meds," she says. "That's how I got in all this trouble. Getting off them."

Walker says she grew up in Virginia Beach, the youngest of three children born to a railroad executive and his wife. Though she was overweight and ill at ease socially, Walker learned early that she had a gift: She could disguise her voice. In high school she called boys to tease them with sexual come-ons, pretending to be other girls. By 16 she was in full-fledged rebellion, running away repeatedly and at one point taking up with a 23-year-old. She was arrested for falsely reporting a fire. On the advice of a psychiatrist, she says, her family agreed to place her in a mental hospital. Eight months later, she emerged with medications for depression.

In her early twenties, Walker says, she was given an additional diagnosis: multiple personality disorder (MPD). Around that time, she became a fan of a Denver minister and radio host named Bob Larson, whose Web site identifies him as "the world's foremost expert on cults, the occult, and supernatural

phenomena." Larson also had an interest in MPD, and Walker thought he might be able to help her. So in 1992, at 24, she packed her bags for Denver.

MPD wasn't officially sanctioned as a psychiatric disorder until 1980, when it was first included in the American Psychiatric Association's bible, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-III*, and it remains a controversial diagnosis. Ira Brenner, M.D., clinical professor of psychiatry at Jefferson Medical College in Philadelphia, has worked with nearly 300 MPD patients. "It's a very subtle disease connected to early trauma," he says. "It may not emerge in a patient for many, many years." But his opinion is far from universal. Paul McHugh, M.D., professor of psychiatry at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, describes MPD as a "socially created artifact." Says Dr. McHugh: "It's not a fraud in the sense that anyone consciously does it. But it tends to be taken up by patients seeking the sick role, usually with the guiding hand of a doctor. I consider it a contemporary form of hysteria." There's a simpler explanation for the repeated deceptions of someone like Walker, Dr. McHugh contends: "These are lonely, indwelling people who are cut off from the natural flow of attention that fills our lives. And [the lying] makes them of interest to nurses, doctors, the police, even journalists; it draws that attention. It's very sad, really."

Walker in a Topeka courtroom in August 2003. She was later extradited to Indiana and charged with identity deception.

> "When Dorothy started crying, I knew right then it had gotten to be too much. But I couldn't stop it."
>
> —DONNA WALKER

Art Dubus, a retired mechanic in Denver, is a deeply religious man—and a fan of Bob Larson. So when he heard a request on Larson's radio show for help in assisting runaways, he volunteered. Walker got Dubus' name from Bob Larson Ministries; she called him from the Denver bus station. Art and his wife, Kathy, welcomed her into their home.

Within days, however, Dubus saw things that gave him pause. While playing with his daughters Keeley, 14, and Andrea, 11, Walker adopted the guise of a preteen girl named Jennifer, voice and all. Then other characters showed up. There was Nonnie, the thumb-sucking kindergartner; Michelle, the promiscuous 14-year-old; an unnamed baby who urinated on the floor; and a protective, take-charge man named Brian.

In the two years that Walker boarded under their roof, the Dubuses saw enough to consider Walker's multiple personalities very real. Walker claims to have been sexually abused as a child—it was during her time with the Dubus family, she says, that she began to confront those memories. She also went to a therapist who taped her sessions and played her the voices of several of her "alters." "I sounded so different," Walker says. "It was hard to take." The couple did what they could for the troubled young woman. "You haven't lived until you've changed the diaper of a 300-pound woman who thinks she's a baby and then gets up and starts talking like a man," Kathy says lightly. "Heck, I even had a drink and a smoke with Brian," Art adds.

But by the summer of 1994, the Dubuses were burned out. For every playful moment with the kids, there was another where Walker would slip into one of her alter egos and stay out all night, often making false reports to cops in neighboring towns. The couple can recall at least a dozen such incidents, including one in which Walker conned an officer out of his police radio. Art Dubus finally told Walker that she had to go. She still calls the Dubus clan "the family that I never had."

Over the next two years, Walker moved a few times, living on Social Security disability payments. By 1999 she was settled in Yuba City, California. There, Walker says, she started trolling through Internet chat rooms with names like littlegirlsexchat, searching for the man she says abused her as a child. She never found him. But in late 2001, posing as an 18-year-old named Holly, she did find a man from Covington, Kentucky, who asked if she wanted to see photos of him. He sent her a nude picture of himself and others of children being sexually abused and tortured.

After years of misleading police with false alarms, Walker finally had a real bad guy to report. She called an FBI agent in Kentucky and agreed to let him set up an e-mail account in her name to receive more photos. When the first batch arrived, they showed the sender, Charles Steers, performing sex acts with a toddler. Steers eventually pleaded guilty to sexual exploitation of children and was sentenced to 20 years in prison. Walker continued working with the FBI; "Holly," as the agents she worked with called her, became responsible for leads that resulted in the arrests of several other pedophiles. Walker argues that the good she did on these cases outweighs any harm she had caused before. And had it all ended there, that might have been true.

Three years later, Walker was living in Lincoln, Nebraska, and back to her old ways, disrupting law enforcement with bogus leads. She called cops in Portland, Oregon, claiming to be a 13-year-old kidnap victim—setting off a costly land and air search. She deluged Urbandale, Iowa, police with calls about people being assaulted at gunpoint. Because she was always calling different cities, no one police offi- *(continued on page 227)*

FROM TOP: AP PHOTO/CHRIS LANDSBERGER. COURTESY OF THE BOONE COUNTY PROSECUTOR'S OFFICE

Liar *continued from page 219*

cer ever connected her hoaxes. And in each of these episodes, Walker was just a voice on the phone. But she soon began craving more intimacy. "I just wanted to talk to normal people," she says, "just to get contact."

That's when she turned to Adoption.com. She would later use the site to zero in on the McDaniels, but her first targets were a pair of Seattle nurses, Kurt and Kathy Julian.

Posing as Heather, a 19-year-old premed student at the University of Nebraska who was about to deliver twin girls, Walker called the Julians on September 20, 2002. She sent them an ultrasound and a portrait of a perky redhead she identified as herself; she asked them to send tapes of their voices so she could play them to her belly.

The Julians arrived in Lincoln on October 14, 2002, expecting to meet a very pregnant Heather. Instead, they say, Walker kept them hanging on the phone, pretending to be having contractions in her apartment. The next day she checked into a hospital—for gallbladder surgery, she says—and called them from her bed, letting them think it was a labor and delivery ward.

After four days of feints, Walker arrived at the Julians' hotel with some phony adoption paperwork, posing now as Heather's Aunt Lynn. Over the next two weeks, the Julians had several meetings with Aunt Lynn; she even gave them a bag of baby gifts. Once she started to lie, Walker says now, she couldn't turn back. "I took no joy in any of it," she insists. "I didn't want to break their hearts." Yet she blames the Julians for the fact that things went too far. "I was thinking, dear God, just let them go home. But those *people* wouldn't leave." At her most desperate, Walker pretended to be in a hotel room with the newborn twins and threatened to kill herself. The Julians spent the whole night trying to talk her out of it. It was their fifth wedding anniversary.

The Julians finally gave up on "Heather"; they left Nebraska not knowing what had hit them. "I'd love to say that I've forgiven her," says Kathy, who recently got a letter of apology from Walker. "But I'm still working on that. I'm a trusting person, but she made me question people's motives."

Walker claims to have flirted with suicide more than once. Each incident led to a new round of therapy, a new shrink to unload her baggage on. So when she needed to leave Lincoln—"It got to be too hot," she says—she made her way to Topeka, then home to the renowned Menninger psychiatric clinic, where she says she hoped to be treated. She wasn't in town long before she made her presence felt. She conned a pastor into helping her, then terrorized him and his congregants with late-night calls to say that "Satanists" were heading their way. A veteran detective who realized the calls were hoaxes made an appointment to meet her. But when he pulled up to her apartment, it was empty.

Walker had fled 50 miles east, to the tiny town of Ottawa, Kansas. There, she picked up where she'd left off in Topeka, tying Ottawa detective Rick Geist in knots with claims that she was an FBI informant who'd located a murder suspect living nearby. Geist chased down every lead she provided.

> "I look at my boys and feel like everything happened for a reason. But at the time I wanted to kill that woman."
>
> —AMY McDANIEL

Only when he got hold of an FBI agent did Geist learn that the agency considered Walker useful—but possibly mentally ill.

Geist cornered Walker outside a Wal-Mart. "I told her that she needed help," he says. He convinced her to get treatment, eventually depositing her at the state psychiatric hospital in Osawatomie, Kansas.

By July 26, 2003, Walker was out of Osawatomie and back on the computer, anonymous again. The promise that she'd made to herself after hoaxing the Julians—"It's the last time that I'm going to do anything like that"—fell by the wayside. That morning she visited Adoption.com and found David and Amy McDaniel.

While the couple frantically priced airfares to Topeka, Walker called Dorothy Sherrill. She says now that her deception was an attempt to help *solve* the mystery of Shannon's disappearance. In one of her visits to Internet chat rooms, Walker claims to have come across someone who hypothesized that Shannon had been murdered. Fascinated by the disclosure, Walker started researching the case online and became convinced that Shannon had been killed by someone close to the Sherrills. Her plan was to call their home, posing as Shannon. As she imagined it, the murderer would gasp when he (or she) heard that the long-lost girl was alive. The guilty party would be revealed; Walker would bask in the credit.

"I think I could be your daughter," she said when she called Sherrill. First she was Beth Anne, the confused suburbanite who thought she might be Shannon. Then she disguised her voice to add intrigue as the husky-voiced witness who could back up Beth Anne's story. Finally she threw in Beth Anne's eager-to-get-to-the-bottom-of-it-all husband, Mark. (Not even the cops could tell they weren't talking to a man.)

"When Dorothy started crying, I knew right then it had gotten to be too much," Walker says. "But I was feeling like I was finally wanted. I couldn't stop it."

Walker *was* finally stopped when one of her first hoaxes caught up with her. In early 1992 she'd called an ex-neighbor in Virginia Beach with a titillating claim: Thugs were trailing her because she had information about the murder of a young woman named Karen Ann Wheeler. But when the former neighbor relayed Walker's "information" to police, it turned out to be full of holes.

On July 28, 2003, as Virginia Beach police continued to work with their counterparts in Thorntown to solve the mystery of Beth Anne Harris, a detective who was familiar with the Wheeler case happened to be on duty. And just as he determined that Beth Anne Harris was likely the same woman, Donna Walker, who'd lied about Wheeler's murder, Walker was making her first major tactical slip-up. Instead of using a store-bought phone card that masked the origin of her calls, she made a call to Thorntown police from her own phone. The cops were able to trace it to one Donna Walker in Topeka; that's when they knew for sure that there was no Beth Anne.

Three days later, Walker logged on to CNN.com, expecting to see a photo of Shannon. Instead, she saw a photo of herself. "That's when I knew it was over," she says.

As Walker's deception became national news, the McDaniels' attorney informed them that their birth mother was a fraud. When Amy heard, she went numb. She taught her seventh grade class at Stonybrook Middle School that day, but she can't remember what she did or how she did it.

"At first I couldn't understand why someone would do that to us," she says. "I couldn't talk to anyone about it for a long time. I mean, what do you tell people? I felt like we were being punished."

The job of seeing that Walker was punished fell to Boone County, Indiana, prose-

Liar *continued from page 227*

cutor Todd Meyer. The charges against her, including identity deception, a felony, and false reporting, a misdemeanor, could have meant a four-year jail term. But, worried that her mental illness could harm his case, Meyer agreed to a plea bargain. Walker served a total of nine months in the Boone County jail and was given four years of probation.

"Do you think people will like me?" she wondered on the day I interviewed her in Topeka. I suggested that the most she might hope for was that they'd understand her. She asked whether Dorothy Sherrill had forgiven her. The McDaniels had slipped her mind completely. She didn't even recognize their names until I reminded her of what she had done to them.

Fortunately, wonderful things had happened to the couple. Not long after they discovered Walker's deception, they met a golden haired boy named T.J., now nearly two years old, who'd been removed from his parents after he was born cocaine positive. The McDaniels took him into their home and nursed him back to health. Then, in December 2003, Amy learned, to her surprise and joy, that she was pregnant. Her son Jaxon was born last July. "Now, I can look at my two boys and feel like everything happened for a reason," Amy says. "But at the time, I wanted to kill that woman."

Walker insists she's not a monster and says she'll stay on the medications that keep her stable enough to resist her worst impulses. "I'm not capable of doing this again," she says. Patty Gates, a volunteer mental health advocate for the Christian Community Jail Ministry Outreach in Boone County, believes in Walker's good intentions. "This is a person who's never fully developed emotionally. She has an inner child inside of her. Whether that means she has MPD I can't say," says Gates. "But I think she's a woman who's kind and loving and has potential. And if what she says about her childhood is true, I don't find it in myself to judge her."

There's little such forgiveness in Dorothy Sherrill, who now lives in a cramped two-room cottage a stone's throw from the Boone County courthouse where Walker cut her deal. "The law hasn't punished her enough for what she did," Sherrill says. "She'd done her homework. She knew so much. She had it down pat. I was convinced. It was like losing Shannon twice. But I still hold out a little bit of hope that maybe the real Shannon saw some of it on TV.

"Maybe one day she'll really call."

Shaun Assael is a best-selling author and a senior writer at ESPN The Magazine.