

Decades-old sexual abuse secrets send Coral Springs man, 77, to prison

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For most of her 42 years, Adriana Carvo has been haunted by a dark secret that shaped her life.

That secret – that she was sexually molested repeatedly from the time she was a toddler until the age of 10 – was an unrelenting weight she carried to Coral Springs High School, to Broward College, where she studied nursing, into a failed first marriage and finally into a Broward courtroom.

There, Carvo confronted her abuser, the man who stole her childhood: her father.

"What you did to me is something that I don't think you can ever comprehend, how you changed my life from this perfect little girl into someone who felt unworthy, damaged, dirty," said Carvo, trembling with emotion, looking directly at Richard Gunter.

As onlookers wept, Carvo recalled the moment she realized "my father is a monster, my own father, who was supposed to be there and protect me and teach me, and all you taught me was, you taught me about sex.

"You are no longer my father," Carvo concluded, "and I will never think of you again after today."

Gunter, 77, is now in prison following his conviction last month on four counts of sexual battery. In a one-day trial, a six-person jury took barely an hour to find the former security guard guilty before Judge Jeffrey Levenson imposed a mandatory sentence of life in prison for crimes that took place in the 1970s and 1980s.

The prosecution was made possible by a legislative change in Florida law that eliminated the statute of limitations for criminal or civil cases related to sexual abuse of children 16 or younger. Since the law went into effect in 2010, Assistant State Attorney Neva Rainford-Smith said she knows of no other successful prosecution for crimes that took place so long ago.

Although Carvo was the only victim named in the grand jury indictment, she was not Gunter's only victim, according to Rainford-Smith.

Also speaking at Gunter's sentencing were his sister, Suellen Behling, and a niece, Michelle Wilson. Both were abused by Gunter as young children while residents of Colorado and Missouri, the women and the prosecutor said.

"I have felt dirty and bad all my life, and I didn't deserve this," said Behling, who at 61 is a little more than 15 years younger than her brother.

"I was a sweet little girl and you took me in that bedroom. This has been a lifelong sentence for me," Behling said in court.

Wilson, 48, called Gunter "the monster in my nightmares" and the reason "I've tried to forget my childhood because

he ruined it.

"He made me feel dirty and that something was wrong with me, probably why I'm not married, probably why I don't have children."

Even though she and Wilson were not named in the criminal indictment of Gunter, Behling said "this became our trial, too, because we were allowed to speak.

"It was an amazing experience for me. I am going to find some peace in my life. We got justice."

For Rainford-Smith, "Watching these victims testify was like seeing the purging of their souls," she said. "It was cathartic for them. And we believe there are other victims, who are either dead or we don't know about."

Gunter is the eldest of four children. He, his wife and their two children, Adriana and her older brother, moved to Coral Springs in 1977. He worked for a paint and body shop, in maintenance at nursing home and as a security guard.

When she was 19, Carvo told her mother about the abuse. But neither she nor her mother called police.

"It took me a long time to get to the point of wanting to punish him," said Carvo, who lived for years in [Boca Raton](#) before moving to the Jacksonville area in 2012. "Had he been a perfect stranger, we would have had him thrown in jail years ago. But he was my dad."

The case against Gunter began in early 2014 after Carvo began going to counseling to deal with the trauma she had fought for decades to suppress.

Behling, after finding that Gunter could not be prosecuted in Colorado because of that state's statute of limitations, was the first to call Coral Springs police. When she told police her story, and those of Carvo and Wilson, Detective Janice Bator of the Special Victims Unit went to interview Carvo in person.

"This is the oldest case I've ever had, but I was very gung-ho about pursuing it," said Bator. "It was just heartwrenching to think about the burden these people have had to carry so long."

In March 2014 Bator called Gunter and asked him to come in to see her. Confronted with the allegations, Gunter gave a full confession, she said. And then he went home to the house in the 2600 block of Northwest 86th Avenue where he has lived for 37 years, Bator said.

Once home, Gunter called Bator's office line, and she returned the call. "He advised that he knew that the crimes he committed against SueEllen (sic) in Glenwood Colorado were not being pursued because they happened so long ago," Bator wrote in an email.

But in Florida, they could be pursued, and Bator pursued them. Gunter was arrested on a warrant on March 12, 2014, five days after his police station confession. Indicted by the grand jury April 2, 2014, he was charged with sexually abusing Carvo in Florida when she was between the ages of 6 and 10, according to Rainford-Smith. He has been in custody ever since.

"Do I think he believed there would be no prosecution following?" Bator said in an email. "I believe he thought he was untouchable after all these years, considering he lived a full life with never having to face the consequences of his horrific actions. Those same actions that weighed on each of his victims: his own little sister, his niece, and his baby girl."

After each of his victims spoke at sentencing, the judge asked Gunter if he wanted to respond. He did.

"I'm really not the bad person you think I am," he said to Behling. He went on to say he had been molested by a baby sitter when he was 12 "and I think this is what started the whole thing."

After Wilson spoke, Gunter said, "I wrote a letter a long time ago to you to apologize and say I was sorry."

After his daughter addressed him, Gunter spoke for the final time.

"I don't know what happened to me that I did these things," he said, "but I do say I'm sorry."

In sentencing Gunter, Levenson said, "You will be living the rest of your life not only in a prison, but in your own prison of knowing what you did and how it affected the others."

The sentence comes with an automatic appeal that could take up to five years.

Before the trial, Carvo had never before been in a courtroom. She had not seen her father for three years. She was so nervous and sick to her stomach, she said, that she ran to the bathroom three times before taking the stand.

"I cried throughout," she said.

When she walked out of the courthouse, however, Carvo said she felt grateful. "I was grateful to the prosecutor and Detective Bator for listening to me and being supportive. They never made me feel I was a fool for waiting for so long," she said.

And, Carvo said, she walked out with a new sense of herself. "I don't think I've ever felt normal in my life," she said, "and now I was finally going to have justice and healing.

"Do I feel normal now, no. But I feel different. Just getting to this point has helped me come out of my shell. I realize that I am a lot braver and stronger than I ever thought I was."

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