

Los Angeles Times
An American Tragedy
One Spur Posse mother struggles to understand.

By Janet Wiscombe, Special to the Times

In the years since the Spur Posse sex scandal propelled her family into the headlines, Dottie Belman has gone from feeling like a total failure as a mother to feeling pretty good about her life.

With an ebullient grin, she gestures at the view from her \$67,000 Lakewood condo: a garden of connecting ponds and gurgling brooks. "Look at this place," she effuses, "I feel like I live in Disneyland."

The exuberance is short-lived. The smile fades. The face tightens as she recalls the horrors that have befallen her family since her youngest son was arrested for sexual misconduct during his senior year at Lakewood High: the visits to another son in jail, the end of the 25-year marriage, the diagnosis of breast cancer.

"I pretend to be happy," she confides, her eyes suddenly flooding with tears. "But I can't be happy. I left home after the Spur Posse thing and never went back and the rubble keeps piling up.

"All the kids are still out doing what they got their names in the paper for. It's been shocking and terrible."

Three years ago this week, a wrecking ball crashed through the Belmans' three-bedroom beige stucco home in Lakewood and the all-American family crumbled. On March 18, 1993, Los Angeles County sheriff's deputies arrested nine Lakewood High School boys on a range of allegations including lewd conduct and rape.

The young men belonged to the Spur Posse, a clique whose members racked up points each time one had an orgasm with a different girl. Several Spurs, including Kristopher Belman and his big brother, Dana, were star athletes, powerful young men worshiped by peers and parents. Dana Belman, one year out of school, was not targeted in the sweep.

All but one of those initially arrested, a 16-year-old charged with lewd and lascivious behavior with a child of 10, were released after a few days in custody. The district attorney's office declined to prosecute in those cases. Greeted with a hero's welcome at Lakewood High staged by some of their classmates--hugs and cheers and T-shirt slogans ("Free Our Spurs: Can't We All Just Get Along?")--several swaggering Spur members soon appeared on national TV to boast of their sexual conquests.

On one talk show, Spur member Billy Shehan revealed that his parents bought him condoms by the box load, and he bragged that he was the high scorer with 66 points, three more than Posse founder Dana Belman.

Dana's dad, Donald, told a reporter at the time, "Nothing my boy did was anything any red-blooded American boy wouldn't do at his age."

Dottie observed then, "Those girls are trash."

Under the glare of public scrutiny, the mostly white, middle-class city of 76,000 became identified with rampant promiscuity and familial dysfunction. The Spur story served to harness fears about teenage values, to give form to a shapeless anxiety about life on Main Street.

In the wake of the scandal, the Rev. Ginny Wagener, executive director of the South Coast Ecumenical Council, helped organize a series of interfaith meetings to discuss community values. She still sees the Spur Posse arrests as much more than an isolated incident involving a few kids with trashy values and criminal minds.

"The society promotes male dominance and sexual promiscuity," Wagener says. "It's part of the culture."

Speaking for the city mothers and fathers, Lakewood spokesman Donald Waldie strongly disagrees. The scandal did not signal the breakdown of Western civilization or the collapse of suburbia, he says.

"At its core, the Spur Posse problem was about a series of extraordinarily immoral choices by a few young men, and the power and destructiveness of one charismatic man--Dana Belman. You have to recognize that the Belman family was and is a deeply troubled family."

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No one would agree more than Dottie Belman. Or less.

It's easy to point fingers, she says. "There aren't a lot of healthy parents raising kids. Everyone is working. Everyone is busy surviving. Everyone is in it for themselves. Children get lost in the shuffle.

"The kids' friends become their family. They watch TV and want more and more. They aren't content with just living. They drink too much. They think everything is supposed to be fun. They are fun hogs.

"They haven't changed. Now they're shooting hoops with one hand and holding babies in the other."

Back when she was holding babies, Dottie took it for granted that she and Don, both Lakewood High graduates, would stay together forever. When the Spur Posse exploded in the news, they were known in the community for their generosity and dedication to kids. Don coached T-ball, Park League, Little League, Pony League, Colt League, Pop Warner. Dottie was team mother, snack chairman and one of the prettiest and most energetic sports fans in town.

"Our kids were superstars," Dottie told a reporter shortly after the arrests. "We became stars too. We'd walk into Little League and we were hot stuff. I'd go to Vons and people would come up to me and say, 'Your kids are great.' "

Now she says flatly, "My kids are a mess."

Of her three boys, only the eldest, Billy, now 25, reached adulthood without hemorrhaging problems. He graduated from Cal State Long Beach, works at a fishing tackle shop and has a steady girlfriend.

Dottie struggles to understand what went wrong with Dana and Kris. Certainly she didn't face up to the problems in her marriage, she says. She gave her kids too many material things, too much praise, not enough responsibility. She closed her eyes to the drinking, the gambling, the swearing, the violence on TV, the socks on the floor, the condoms in the car ashtray, the overdeveloped pectorals--and egos.

With a wry chuckle she says, "Dana went from no spankings to maximum security."

Now 23, he is serving a 10-year sentence in the California Men's Colony for 13 fraud and burglary convictions.

Dottie shares a shopping list he recently mailed from the San Luis Obispo prison: 25 cans of solid white tuna, cookies, candy, Folger's coffee, iced tea, cherry Kool-Aid.

"Now Dana gets his prestige from tuna," Dottie says. "Tuna! He stacks it up in a pyramid like gold. It's his adulation. His tuna is like a symbol of success or wealth or specialness or betterment or something."

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Kris, 21, has been too depressed to do much of anything.

For most of the last three years, he had the run of the family house on Greentop Street, once a lovingly cared for home with lots of framed family photos and a remodeled kitchen that Dottie designed and built with her own hands. The summer after Kris graduated from high school, a judge ordered him to perform 100 hours of community service and join a counseling program for sex offenders. During the Spur Posse investigation, police had learned of another incident dating from to Kris' junior high years--the alleged molestation of a 13-year-old girl. (The charges were dropped after he completed the informal probation.)

Since the house was sold last fall, he has been sleeping on a friend's couch, working at a job unloading boxes and playing with his children, ages 2 and 6 months. He can't support himself, much less the babies, who live with their mother and her parents in Norwalk.

Kris says he doesn't want to talk. Then he apologizes. "I'm sorry. I'm stressed out and depressed by everything."

Last Fourth of July, he witnessed the death of one of his best friends, Spur Posse alumnus Chris Albert, who was gunned down during a melee in Huntington Beach. Other high school friends have also died violent deaths. And two other Posse alums are accused of attempted murder. (See related story, E1.)

"Kris comes over and cries and cries," Dottie says. "He says, 'I have no home, no family. I have two kids and my life is over.' "

Shortly after the Posse arrests, Dottie moved out of the house. Although she had filed for divorce months earlier, she was still living at home.

"I should have stayed and faced the music," she says now. "I felt like a failure. When I left home I wasn't choosing my happiness over theirs. It was more of a running. I let my kids get away with murder and I knew it. I thought it was too late to undo the damage. . . .

"I never made them accountable. If they got me a touchdown, that was enough. I covered everything up. I gave, gave, gave, gave, gave. I expected nothing in return. I wanted them and all of their friends to like me. I wanted to be the coolest mom in town.

"All of our energy went into sports. I thought it was good for the family. We were all together. We made heroes and stars out of our children, and we became stars. It felt good. But it goes to your head. You get a big ego. You begin to feel better than everybody else. My kids are going down the slow drain of specialness."

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Dottie says she could not have survived the past three years without the support of her friends at the beauty shop where she works, her boyfriend and her sister. She and Don, who lives with a girlfriend and works as a salesman for an aerospace vendor, take turns visiting Dana every few months.

Dana got married while in prison, but his wife rarely visits. It makes Dottie mad. Yet she can also understand. "Visiting him is like going to the cemetery to visit a dead person."

Since moving into her condo three months ago, she has completely gutted and rebuilt the kitchen--cabinets and all. Physical work is the best therapy, she says. Self-help books and support groups, from psychotherapy to Tough Love, have left her empty and confused.

There's so much talk about letting go, she says. But when your kids are hurt and in trouble, is letting go the right thing to do?

She reaches for Kleenex. She says she's haunted by guilt and questions about raising children. But she says she refuses to live in fear of a recurrence of breast cancer, diagnosed less than a month after the Spur Posse arrests.

"I don't want to talk about the cancer. I tell myself, 'I had it, and now I don't have it anymore.' "

It doesn't always work. Her mother died of breast cancer at 53. She is 46. Hard as she tries to keep busy and put a happy face on things, the tears won't obey.

They fill her eyes when she says, "My kids aren't happy. It breaks my heart.

"I wanted to be married forever and ever and watch my grandchildren grow up. I'm disappointed.

"I keep thinking the better and kinder I am, the more people will be like that back to me. It doesn't seem to work out that way."

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An American Tragedy
She paid the price for speaking out.

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By Janet Wiscombe, Special to the Times

In Lakewood, Gina Day is still scorned, still punished with the stings and stabs of contempt.

Four years ago, at age 16, she says, she was raped by a Spur Posse member. And then she did something unacceptable, something that marked her as a Bad Girl. She told.

The assault occurred, Day says, when her attacker invited her outside to talk after both attended a meeting at the same Catholic church where she had been baptized. The next day, she called the police from school. The young man was arrested but later released without ever being charged.

In time, seven other teenage girls would make similar allegations against other Spur Posse members.

Day, then a Lakewood High sophomore, was so devastated by the assault--and by the death of her father a month later--that she dropped out and enrolled in home study. It wasn't until her senior year that she felt strong enough to return.

She anticipated some embarrassing comments and kidding. That was the price for speaking out. At a victims' rights rally at a city park and later on the daytime talk show "Montel Williams" she railed against Spur Posse members for abusing girls with their sex-for-points contest.

But Day was not prepared for the unrelenting invective. "Spur Posse boys would take swings at me in the hall and say, 'I'm going to kill you.' They called me a bitch, a whore, a slut.

"I went home and cried and cried. Most days I was home from school at 10:30 in the morning. No one would help."

Although Day says she repeatedly told school administrators what was going on, and repeatedly filled out forms naming her tormentors, the abuse continued.

Principal Mike Escalante, now assistant superintendent for business services for the Palos Verdes Peninsula Unified School District, declined to comment on the school's handling of the incident.

So did his replacement, Jon Meyer. But the current principal did say he's determined nothing like the Spur Posse case will happen under his watch. "If it does," he says, "I deserve my head on a tray."

Meyer adds that he is deeply concerned about society's "incessant messages about sex, violence and alcohol." And that he is sympathetic to young women. "Any time adolescents become sexually active, it's the boys who do the bragging. The girls are the prey in our culture."

No one knows that better than Day. Before the incident, she was a cheerleader, a color guard member and an honors student who had lived in the same tidy, tree-shaded neighborhood all her life. Afterward, she was an outcast. Even some of the girls she'd known since kindergarten joined in the hazing, she says.

"The girls turned on me because it made it easier. It was easier to blame me, to think, 'She must have done something to have something so horrible happen to her.'"

Midway through her senior year, Day could no longer bear the daily debasement. She left school and finished her course work with home study and classes at Long Beach City College. Now 20 and four months pregnant with her first child, Day lives with her fiancé in another city in Southern California. She sells real estate and works as a volunteer and a speaker at a center for abused women.

Reflecting on the many people she believes let her down--including her priest--Day reserves particular bitterness for school administrators. "They would call the boys in and say, 'Now let's all be mature enough to work this out.' Mature! If someone is so immature as to do all this harassment in the first place, 'working things out' is never going to happen. There have to be rules."

Meanwhile, the district attorney's office declined to prosecute all but one of the boys initially arrested in the Spur Posse case.

Attorney Gloria Allred, who represented Day and five of the other girls who made the 1993 allegations, says the criminal justice system abandoned the young women. "The message is: Boys can continue to target girls with impunity."

During trips back home, Day says she still runs into people at the grocery store or the mall who treat her with contempt. One of her younger brothers plays football at Lakewood High. She'd love to see a game, but can't endure the punishing stares.

"It's like hell for me there."

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Some never got back on track.

By Janet Wiscombe, Special to the Times

Every now and then, just for laughs, Mike Weber and some of his fellow Spur Posse alums get together to watch the tapes of their exploits on national TV.

"Back then, we were young cocky punks, plain and simple," says the 20-year-old, who three years ago talked with bravado about his sex-for-points conquests at Lakewood High School. "We weren't as bad as people said. Half of what we said was for show. We did do points, but we weren't exploiting people."

Back then, Spur Posse founder Dana Belman defined himself as "a step above everyone else." Now he's serving a 10-year prison sentence for burglary and fraud.

Back then, Chris Albert spoke of the thrill of being a Big Man on Campus and a talk-show star, and of how he later came to regret his behavior. Now he's dead, gunned down last Fourth of July in a Huntington Beach melee.

While some of the Spur Posse members were chastened by the scandal, more than a few of the others arrested in the sweep have been unable to put their lives on track.

Last year, six young men from Lakewood, including former Spur Posse members Dana Kawamura and Ronnie Breceda, were arrested in connection with the near fatal stabbing of a young man at a New Year's Eve party in Seal Beach. Kawamura and Breceda have been charged with attempted murder and assault with a deadly weapon. A trial date is pending.

"Everywhere you go, people are carrying guns and knives," says Weber, who has spent time in jail for assault with a deadly weapon and now volunteers as a speaker at facilities for juvenile offenders. "Everyone wants to be a tough guy."

"But we don't get drunk and go fight anymore. We still drink, but not like we used to. We don't go around saying we're Spur Posse guys. Not no more."

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Well, maybe occasionally.

"We meet people at parties. They ask where we're from. We say, 'Lakewood.'"

" 'Are you one of those guys?' they ask. Sometimes saying we're Spur Posse is good. Sometimes not. It goes both ways."

In his role as rehabilitated criminal, Weber tells troubled kids, "Jail isn't the hard part. The hard part is the real world."

Indeed, the ink on his release papers was barely dry when Weber was stabbed during a fight. It took 65 stitches to close his split chin. Now he lives at home with his dad and younger brother, works irregularly as a security guard and spends at least two hours a day at the gym. He plans to play college football in the fall at a "big-time university." He won't say which one.

While he's scoring touchdowns, many of his friends will be changing diapers. At least seven children have been born to unwed former Spur Posse members, many of whom were star athletes in high school.

"Everyone is just breeding," Weber notes approvingly. "I see them [the children], and I love them all."

Michelle McGill, 22, is the mother of two babies by Spur Posse member Kris Belman. She lives with her parents in Norwalk and is studying to be a medical assistant. "Kris watches the kids and stuff but has had a hard time finding jobs," McGill says. "I'm not getting married for a long time," she adds. "Not until I'm 25 at least. I have enough responsibility."

Since the death of Albert, Weber says he and his Spur Posse buddies have never been closer. "Not a day goes by when we don't talk about Chris," he says. "We don't take things for granted no more."

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