Ray Spencer Didn’t Molest His Kids. So Why Did He Spend 20 Years in Prison for It?

Matt and Katie accused their father of sexual abuse. Then they started to question their memories.

By Maurice Chammah
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On Christmas Eve in 2004, Katie Spencer Tetz, a twenty-five-year-old job recruiter living in Sacramento, California, was sitting on the floor near her Christmas tree, wrapping gifts, when the phone rang. It was her mother, DeAnne, with news: After 19 years, Katie's father, Ray, was going to be released from prison. The last time Katie saw Ray she was six years old.

She hung up, grabbed her keys, and lunged for the door with no destination in mind, just a primal urge to move. Her husband, Mike, ran over to hold her as she sobbed by the door, in the grip of fear and grief she rarely let herself feel.

Katie barely knew her father, but his life was the central mystery of her own. He was the reason she could never make sense of her earliest childhood memories, and why she wasn't sure she wanted to.

For most of Katie's life, Ray had been locked away in a Washington state prison, serving two life sentences for violently molesting Katie, her brother and their step-brother. The case—a 1985 conviction on eleven counts of statutory rape—was based largely on what the kids told investigators under questioning. Almost two decades passed before a new defense team discovered disturbing flaws in the investigation. The governor had commuted Ray's sentence, and he was getting out.

Katie, age three, during a visit to her father’s home in Washington, in the summer of 1982.
Courtesy of Ray Spencer

Katie didn't know the full story. She knew only what DeAnne had told her growing up: that Ray had touched her "inappropriately." Katie didn't remember any of the abuse, but DeAnne explained that Katie had most likely buried the terrible things her father had done to her so deeply that she couldn't access any recollections of them.

That never felt right to Katie, though. She had long nursed a suspicion that the memories weren't there because they didn't exist, and her father had been innocent all along. If that was the case, it meant she and her older brother, Matt, had played a role in putting their father in prison.

Now that he was set to be released, Katie and her brother might see him again, and come to terms with the fact that a few moments of their childhood—moments Katie could scarcely remember, and moments Matt remembered all too well—had derailed their entire family.

When her parents divorced in 1979, Katie was still a baby; Matt was three. They lived in Sacramento with DeAnne, who struggled to provide for them, working as a janitor and in various office jobs. Twice a year, the kids visited their father in Washington State, where he worked as a police officer. He was known among friends as cocksure and flirtatious, but also as a doting father, who fished and camped with his kids. Katie would hunt for blackberries and snap peas in his rambling backyard. A few years after the divorce, he moved in with his second wife, Shirley, and her son, also named Matt. When everyone was together, Ray's son became Big Matt, and Shirley's was known as Little Matt.

Katie, two years old. She would accuse her father of rape three years later.
Courtesy of Ray Spencer

In August 1984, Ray attended a police conference out of town, leaving all three children with Shirley. When he returned, she was despondent. One night, she told him, she and the children had been watching a movie before bed when Katie, then five, tried to stick her hand under Shirley's robe and between her legs. "What are you doing?" Shirley asked, startled. "I'm trying to touch your pee-pee," Katie said. She said it was something she often did with her daddy and other members of her family.

By the time Shirley told Ray this, his children had already returned to Sacramento. Ray was stunned: Could "daddy" be a reference to some boyfriend of DeAnne's? He went into cop mode, sitting Shirley down and telling her to write out everything she could recall Katie saying. He called the local police, the sheriff, and Child Protective Services offices in both Vancouver, Washington, and Sacramento.

In Sacramento, police did not pursue a full investigation. But Sharon Krause, an investigator with the Clark County Sheriff's Office in Washington, took an interest in the case and visited Katie in Sacramento several times.

Krause was known for her ability to win the trust of traumatized kids, a skill that was increasingly in demand. By 1984, a consensus had developed among social workers, psychologists, and law enforcement that sexual crimes against children had been chronically

underreported and under-punished. In her police report, Krause wrote, Katie was shy at first; then she described a moment when "my dad's wiener was sticking up." Katie grabbed two dolls Krause had brought and demonstrated various sexual acts. "My daddy was being bad," she said.

Ray didn't know the full extent of the accusations. He agreed to take two polygraphs, and immediately after the second one, Krause's supervisor, Mike Davidson, told Ray he hadn't passed.

In January 1985, five months after Shirley told Ray about Katie's strange behavior, Ray was charged with sexually assaulting Katie. Over the next few months, more accusations followed: Little Matt, age four, said Ray had raped him in a bathtub and nearly drowned him. Big Matt, then nine, told Krause he had been raped, too, and not just by his father; he said Ray had invited other police officers over to participate. Investigators never gleaned enough detail to charge anyone else. (Krause, Davidson and DeAnne Spackman, formerly Spencer, declined interviews for this story.)

Mike Davidson of the Clark County Sheriff's Office.
Clark County Sheriff's Office

After Katie's accusation, Ray shifted from rage into a kind of disassociated horror. "As a cop, it's all black and white," he says. "Suddenly, I'm looked at as the bad guy." He was ordered by his police department to stay home, and was often alone. "You think about what it's going to take to

get up the next morning," he says of that time. "You just sit there and obsess. You think about every facet."

One day, it was too much to bear, and Ray pulled out his .357. "I remember a little voice in the back of my head saying, 'Hey, maybe for your children's sake, you should get some help." He called a suicide hotline and was whisked off to a psychiatric hospital, where he let himself break. "They found me holed up in the corner, crying," he says. "I don't remember much of it other than the attendants rushing in."

Drugs stabilized him enough that he could return home, but they also fogged his mind as the accusations from Little Matt and Big Matt started to pile up. What if somehow he *had* molested the kids but just couldn't remember it? If that was the case, he thought, then he deserved to be locked up. "My God, why can't I remember?" he told investigators. "What's the matter with me?" He agreed to try sodium amytal—truth serum—and took so much that it knocked him out. Still, no memories.

"In the haze, there was a niggling in my stomach that something wasn't right," Ray says. But as the trial approached, he was presented with what he saw as an impossible choice: force his own kids to relive on the witness stand whatever unspeakable things had happened to them, or confess to something he couldn't remember. That May, Ray decided to take an Alford plea—similar to a "no contest" plea, acknowledging the strength of the case against him without admitting guilt—and was sentenced to two life sentences, plus fourteen years.

Katie's childhood felt like a story told to her by other people. As a child, every so often, she would ask her mother what happened to Ray. DeAnne's answers were vague. "'He was sick; he did things he shouldn't have done,'" Katie recalls her mother saying. "I don't think I even knew he was in jail."

Katie eventually learned Ray was in prison for "inappropriately touching" her and Matt. She accepted the story without much ruminating. But around the beginning of middle school, she started to harbor private feelings of confusion. "I had these thoughts a lot—like, Why don't I feel like I've been wronged? Why don't I feel like I've been molested?" She attributed her lack of memory to her age when the alleged abuse occurred. She had no reason to doubt her mother and every reason to doubt herself.

THE SPENCER CASE

AUGUST 1971
Ray Spencer marries DeAnne Spackman.

NOVEMBER 1975
Matt Spencer is born.

JANUARY 1979
Katie Spencer is born.

DECEMBER 1979
Ray and DeAnne separate.

JULY 1983
Ray marries Shirley.

AUGUST 1984
Shirley believes Katie has disclosed sexual abuse, tells Ray; he calls authorities. A doctor examines Katie, finds no evidence of sexual abuse.

SEPTEMBER-DECEMBER 1984
Sharon Krause interviews Katie multiple times.

SEPTEMBER 1984
Ray takes two polygraph tests.

JANUARY 1985
Ray charged with rape of Katie.

FEBRUARY 1985
Shirley's son, Matt Hansen, allegedly discloses he was abused by Ray. Ray is arrested.

MARCH-MAY 1985
Krause and prosecutor interview Matt Spencer.

MAY 1985
Ray takes an Alford Plea, given multiple life sentences.

JULY 1985
Ray divorces Shirley.

DECEMBER 2004
Ray's sentence is commuted.

FEBRUARY 2006
Ray meets Matt in Seattle; Matt signs affidavit saying he was never abused.

AUGUST 2007
Katie emails Ray.

SEPTEMBER 2007
Katie officially recants her accusation.

JANUARY 2014
Civil trial in which Matt, Ray, and Katie sue Krause and Davidson.

AUGUST 2014
Judge reverses trial verdict, setting up current appeals.

MAY 2017

Appeals court rules in the Spencer family's favor.

Still, she couldn't shake the gap between what she had been told for her entire life, and what she *felt*— that perhaps the story wasn't true. She and Matt weren't especially close, but he seemed like the only person she could ask. When Katie was twelve and Matt sixteen, she cornered him. "It's so weird," she said to her brother. "I don't remember any of the things they say he did to us."

"You don't remember," Matt said, "because it didn't happen."

Neither Katie nor Matt recall where they were during this conversation or what either said next. Their memories are in snippets, barely formed. But it didn't feel cathartic, Katie says. She felt helpless. "Matt and I would have an intense conversation, but then I'd have to drop it because what was there to say? I didn't know what to do, since I didn't know my own mind." She had been taught to trust authority figures—police, courts, therapists—and above all, her mom. Who was right?

For a few more years, Katie's lack of memory gnawed at her. She poked around in the recesses of her mind, looking for feelings she thought a trauma victim might experience: revulsion, shame, panic, flashes of painful memories. "There was nothing," she says. "There was no physical feeling to back it up, to explain it."

Once she became sexually active, it seemed even more confusing: Young survivors of childhood sexual abuse and incest often feel either overly anxious and fearful about sexual attention as they enter adolescence or go out of their way to seek out sexual experiences. Katie didn't have either reaction. "There was a girl in high school who was raped and was just destroyed by it. I remember thinking, That's not me; I don't feel that,'" Katie says. Her first kiss, her first boyfriends, her first sexual experiences, all felt organic and natural.

Ray was presented with an impossible choice: force his own kids to relive on the witness stand whatever unspeakable things had happened to them, or confess to something he couldn't remember.

One day when Katie was in high school, she finally asked her mother if it was possible that her father had never touched her. DeAnne had kept diaries during those years and finally showed them to her daughter. They documented how Katie kicked and screamed at doctors' appointments, and how Matt acted out and seemed angry, which DeAnne attributed to abuse. To Katie, they weren't totally convincing; they were too filtered through her mother's preconceptions. But reading her mother's memories was a refuge, a trick to keep her mind from reckoning with what it would mean for her father to be innocent. "I'd try to fix my feelings of guilt by ping-ponging to the other side," she says.

Ray Spencer, center, with his son, Matt Spencer, and his daughter, Katie Spencer Tetz, in Lincoln, California, in June 2016.
(Mark Mahaney)

Katie learned to play two roles: With her mother, she agreed that Ray must be guilty; with Matt, she acknowledged that he was likely right about their father's innocence. It was bad enough to

grow up feeling like her life had been marked by something awful that she couldn't remember, but feeling caught between the two people who knew her most intimately was worse. "It's like everyone knows more about your own life than you do," she says.

Katie shelved the contradictions, falling into a deep denial she acknowledges today. "I kept myself so busy, and I think it helped," she says. She spent hours every day in gymnastics and dance, and as she grew into young adulthood, she decided she likely would never untangle the mess of her early life. She didn't try to reach out to Ray in prison. She didn't look for court documents, so she still had no idea that her father had been accused of doing anything worse than what she had been told.

In her early twenties, still in Sacramento, she married Mike, a single dad, and became a stepmom. She buried what she didn't want to confront about her own family by devoting herself to a new one. Her refusal to dig up the past became a kind of victory as she settled into a stable, domestic future.

Matt, on the other hand, was falling apart.

He was nine when his mother received a call from police that led DeAnne to become frantic and inquisitive. Soon after, a detective stopped by to ask if his father had ever touched him. Matt said no.

Then one afternoon, Sharon Krause picked him up at home. He was apprehensive about climbing into a stranger's car, but she bought him a cup of hot chocolate and a Matchbox car at a 7-Eleven and then took him to a room at a Holiday Inn. Krause told him that Katie said their father touched her private areas, and that sometimes adults touch kids because they're sick, and that their father needed help. Wouldn't he like to help him?

Katie poked around in the recesses of her mind, looking for feelings she thought a trauma victim might experience: revulsion, shame, panic, flashes of painful memories.

"She never really got anything out of me," Matt says. Krause took him home. A few months later, his mother took him back to the sheriff's office, where Krause appeared for more questions. She mentioned in passing that if he were older she could give him a lie-detector test. His gut flooded with terror. "I didn't know what a lie detector was. I thought you actually got stuck with a needle," Matt says. Krause also told him that his stepbrother had said Ray forced him to have sex and that all three kids had been in the room.

Matt continued denying, but a thought darted through his mind: What if something had happened and he just didn't remember? "The human mind is crazy. If you say something enough, you start to think it's really happening," he says. "So eventually I wondered a little bit." He remembers the feeling of giving in, of letting his mind dupe itself for one moment: *Yes*, he finally said. *It's all true*. "Just agree," he remembers thinking, "and that'll be that."

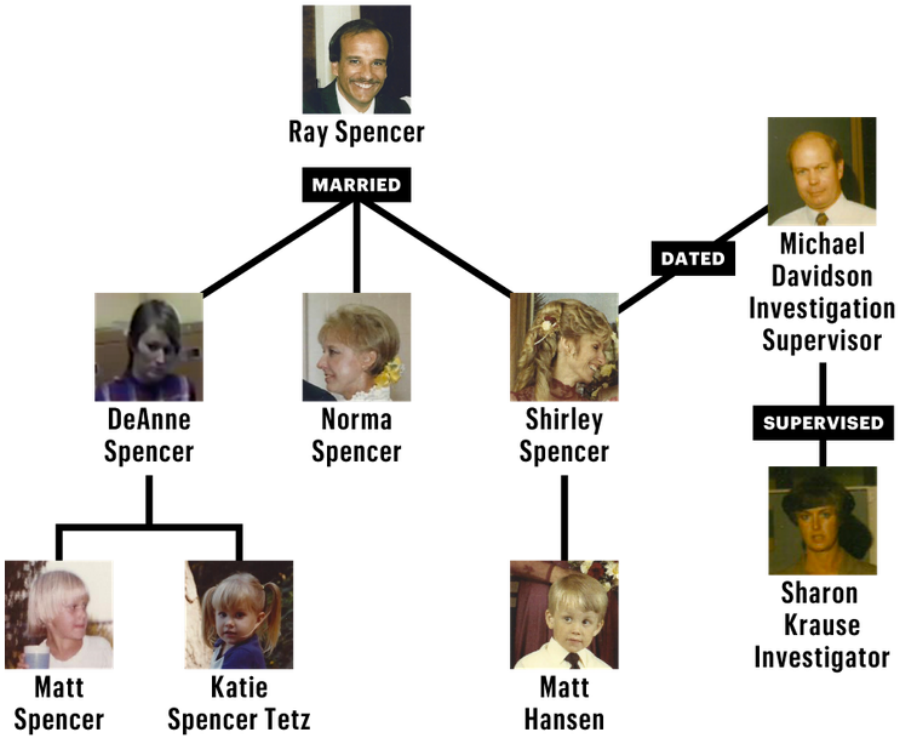

Image Courtesy The Marshall Project

A few weeks later, DeAnne took him to meet a prosecutor, and Matt made up details to satisfy the badgering adults. *Had other men been involved?* Yes, Matt said. *What did he remember about them?* One had a red Porsche, and another had a yellow sweater. Matt wasn't being that creative: He saw a red Porsche in the parking lot outside, and the prosecutor interviewing him was wearing a yellow sweater. The prosecutor ended the interview without following the leads.

Matt knew he'd done something irrevocable.

Even today, as an adult, Matt tends to think in black and white. There are good guys in his story and there are bad guys. There's what really happened and what didn't. Unlike Katie and Ray, who both dug for memories that weren't there, Matt knew that would be a waste of time. He knew these people were doing something wrong. He had let them win. Everyone in his life—his aunts, his therapist, his teachers, even his girlfriends—believed DeAnne, and Ray's imprisonment just confirmed it.

Matt had his own story, too, but nobody believed it. "My behavior changed," he says. "I didn't give a shit anymore." He skipped school, failed classes, and started drinking and smoking pot. By sixteen, he was regularly sneaking out of the house. Slowly, the source of his anger and rebellion became clear to him. "I realized it was guilt. I was going downhill because I was avoiding something." He was, after all, the one who had knowingly lied about what Ray had done. "I felt responsible for it. And [I felt] helplessness, not knowing what to do, how to help him."

He ratcheted up from marijuana and alcohol to methamphetamine, and by 2002, when he was in his early twenties, his rent checks started to bounce. He was living with Katie, the only one who listened when he said their father was innocent, but once he fell into addiction, she was fed up with him, too. Katie told him she didn't want him at her wedding.

Matt gave up on the idea that he could ever help himself, or his father. "Everyone had given up on me," he says, "so I did whatever … wallowing in my sadness."

In 2004, his mother approached him with a letter. Ray had applied for clemency from the governor, and DeAnne asked Matt to sign a letter she'd written in his voice, arguing against the commutation. "The thought that [Ray] may be released has set me on edge," the letter read. "Will I have to spend the rest of my life looking over my shoulder?"

Matt didn't read it. He felt himself become nine again, giving in to get rid of a hectoring adult. He signed his name at the bottom.

Despite the letter, the governor commuted Ray's sentence just before Christmas 2004. He based his decision on new information dug up by a legal team funded by Ray's third wife, Norma, a nurse he had known in the 1960s and married from prison. The team found that the prosecution's case against Ray had been far weaker than he'd known: Ray hadn't flunked the polygraph after all; it had been inconclusive. A doctor had examined Katie and found no signs of sexual abuse. And Ray had already found out something he considered far more damning: Not long after Ray went to prison, Shirley moved in with the investigation's supervisor, Mike Davidson. He believed he'd been set up: "It all starts falling into place. So many people were complicit in this."

By New Year's Eve 2005, Ray was out of prison. The case became newsworthy, and in the fall, a reporter called Matt. On a whim, Matt asked the reporter for Ray's email address. He emailed his father, asking if he could fly up to Seattle, where Ray was on parole.

Even though Matt was convinced of Ray's innocence, DeAnne's narrative around his father was still in the back of his mind. "If I'm not back in three days," he told Katie, "come up and look for me.'"

As Matt descended the Seattle airport escalator in February 2006, he spotted an older man with a mustache. That must be him, he thought. But he kept walking to the baggage claim—DeAnne had gotten into his head enough to give him pause. All he knew about this man was that he'd spent twenty years in prison. Who knew what kind of person would emerge? Finally, Matt approached the man.

"You looking for your son?" he said. Ray nodded and then broke down in tears.

Matt had long told himself that Ray's infidelity was the reason DeAnne was ready to believe the worst about him, so one of his first questions to his father was a test: Had Ray really cheated on his mother? Ray admitted that he had. "I tried to be very honest," Ray recalls.

Matt Spencer
(Mark Mahaney)

It worked. "I watched him break down and cry, and it wasn't some acting scene. I realized he was genuine," Matt says.

Throughout the weekend, they mostly stuck to small talk, chatting about fishing as they walked through the outdoor markets near Lake Washington. "You're almost walking around on eggshells, because it's a dream come true—you've finally reunited with your son, and you don't want anything to blow that," Ray says. A year out of prison, Ray was still wearing an ankle monitor and had a curfew.

After two days, Ray finally addressed what they were both thinking: "Son, I didn't do it."

"I know," Matt replied. "That's why I'm here. I need to make this right." The next day, Monday morning, they went to the office of Ray's attorney, where Matt signed an affidavit stating that he had never been abused. "It was liberating," Matt says. "One of those moments when you know you're doing everything right." His account has the feel of a conversion narrative: he was lost, but admitting his primal, early sin—lying about his father—absolved him of the rest. Almost immediately after meeting Ray again, Matt says, he kicked his drug habit. "I didn't have a drug problem," he says. "I had a life problem."

When he got home, Matt told Katie everything he had learned. She was struck by how her brother appeared, almost instantly, to have stopped using drugs. "I don't think I was grasping how much guilt he had," she says.

But she was still afraid to meet Ray herself. Pregnant with her first child, Katie had spent so many years trying to cultivate a normal adulthood that she didn't want to open a Pandora's box that might threaten everything. "I felt like things needed to settle down before I could gather the courage," she says.

Roughly a year after Matt's return, without telling Katie, her husband, Mike, sent Ray an email. Mike's own father had died, and he and Katie had a new baby daughter. "Katie doesn't know I'm writing to you," he began. "This is just to let you know that I promise to take care of your daughter and give her the best life that I can provide to her."

Ray responded: "If she decides that she wants me in her life, then I will welcome that."

Ray Spencer
(Mark Mahaney)

Months went by, and Mike reminded Katie that parents don't live forever. In August 2007, she finally typed out an email to Ray: "I am not completely sure why I am writing to you and I don't have any idea what to say. Over 20 years has passed and you have missed so much…I don't know how to have a relationship with you because I really don't know who you are."

"There has been so much hurt for all concerned," Ray replied. "I can only hope that in some way we will be able to get beyond that...I only had a few short years of your life but I could recount a hundred things that I remember about you."

They went back and forth over four days, trying to strike a careful balance between gathering new information and not offending each other. "We are both winging this one," he wrote. Ray had moved to Los Angeles with Norma. After a few months of emails, in February 2008, Katie invited him to come to her home in Sacramento.

When he knocked, Katie grew nervous. "How are we going to handle this?" she asked her husband. Mike opened the door and said, "Come on in, Pop."

The young, lean man of Katie's earliest memories was now brawny and balding, with the macho, wary gait of an ex-prisoner. "I felt instantly like he was my father," Katie says. "There was a familiarity about him." But they were still tentative around each other, sitting around Katie's kitchen table. Ray spent so many years hiding his feelings; now, before his own family members, he struggled to share them. They went to an RV show, just to have something to do. "You [have to] start slow," Matt says. "You have to have commonalities, things you've done together."

At first, they avoided the looming questions about Katie's accusations and Ray's conviction. Ray worried that Katie might have lingering doubts about his innocence; Katie quietly struggled more and more with her own culpability. "The guilt got worse once I met him because he became real," she says. "I felt sick about it."

It worsened further as she listened to Ray's stories from prison. While behind bars, Ray had created an elaborate fake identity so that the other prisoners would not find out about his child rape conviction or his past as a police officer—two things he knew would make his life in prison even more of a hell than it already was. Still, he lost teeth in fights while trying to avoid being raped himself. Katie could only absorb a little at a time. She deflected her discomfort by kidding him about how he used to care so much about his appearance.

"The prime of his life was gone," she says. "Everyone can say, 'You were a kid,' over and over, but they don't understand. You know you were used, and there is a kind of guilt in that. And there probably shouldn't be. But nobody can convince me not to feel guilty."

Ray begged them not to feel responsible. He tried to demonstrate to Matt and Katie that they'd been pawns, showing them the trove of documents his attorneys had collected. For the first time, Katie read the police reports in which she'd accused Ray of forcing her to have intercourse. She was shocked; she hadn't been told any of this. "When I saw the specifics, I thought, Whoa! There's no way I wouldn't remember *that*. I couldn't bury *that*."

She signed her own affidavit stating she had never been abused. Ray's lawyers used it as part of a new push to clear his name, and by 2010 all charges had been dropped. ABC's "20/20" did a special on their case and asked for childhood photos. As Katie looked through the pictures, she tried to understand what distant version of herself could falsely accuse someone she loved.

Since 1989, more than 200 people have been freed from prison after being proven innocent of a sex crime against a child, according to the National Registry of Exonerations, often because the

child—who may be a family member of the accused—recanted an accusation. The same year Katie accused her father, eight-year-old Kyle Sapp was led by interviewers to accuse employees of the McMartin Preschool in southern California of outlandish Satanic crimes. In 2005, he published an account in the *Los Angeles Times* titled "I'm Sorry." Like Matt, he knew he had allowed himself to be pressured into accusing adults he knew were innocent. "I felt uncomfortable and a little ashamed that I was being dishonest," Sapp wrote. "But at the same time, being the type of person I was, whatever my parents wanted me to do, I would do."

Katie Spencer Tetz
(Mark Mahaney)

In some cases, children became public advocates for the people they accused, figuring out whom to blame and taking action against them, mollifying their guilt with anger. Matt was always angry. Katie's anger erupted when she saw the videotape.

During the push to clear Ray's name, a VHS tape emerged from the original investigation. A prosecutor is interviewing Katie in 1984 to see how she might hold up on the witness stand. For forty-seven minutes, Katie's mother strokes her hair as the young girl repeats that "nothing happened last summer." The prosecutor then suggests they take a break. When the tape resumes a little more than an hour later, Katie is in a better mood. "Would you show me what Ray did?" the prosecutor asks. Katie demonstrates the two dolls having sex.

Ray showed it to Katie, who was furious. Watching the tape as an adult, she believed it was clear she'd been manipulated. She thought of her own young daughter, how innocent she was and how nauseating it would be if someone convinced her to talk about sex and make accusations. As she and Matt came to believe their father had been railroaded—and learned that Washington had no law providing compensation for the wrongfully convicted—they decided to sue the investigator, Sharon Krause, and Mike Davidson, Krause's supervisor at the time (and, later, Shirley's boyfriend).

The civil case went to trial in January 2014. Matt had to explain to jurors why he signed his mother's letter opposing Ray's commutation. He was stoic on the stand, but afterward, he broke down in tears; he knew he could have come forward sooner to help his father. Matt Hansen, the alleged third victim—"Little Matt" back when they were kids—maintained that Ray had raped him and appeared visibly surprised when he learned on the witness stand that the others had recanted.

The month-long trial was the longest period Ray, Matt, and Katie had ever spent together as adults. Each day after court, they debriefed. Did Sharon Krause really know Ray was innocent? Did Matt Hansen really believe he had been molested? They realized that they'd always live with unanswered questions: The minds and memories of so many people who shaped their lives would remain inaccessible to them.

Chief among them was Shirley: Ray had long believed her to be unstable, and at the trial she told the jury she had been molested as a child by multiple family members, including her father, who, like Ray, was a police officer. Could this have led her to misinterpret Katie's innocent words and gestures? At the time of the trial, Katie had her own seven-year-old daughter, Mia, who had often asked questions about the differences between her own body and her mother's. Katie remembered being curious in similar ways. "I think I probably did ask her a question and it got blown completely out of proportion," Katie says. "I remember just being curious, a little girl being curious about why she looked the way she looked." (Shirley Spencer and Matt Hansen did not respond to requests for comment for this story.)

Krause and Davidson denied any wrongdoing in the investigation. But after two and a half days of deliberation, the jury decided that the defendants had conspired to violate Ray's rights, delivering a verdict of $9 million. Seven months later, the trial judge overturned the verdict for a narrow reason related to the jury instructions.

The family waited. Nearly three years went by as the decision was appealed.

In May 2017, Ray had back surgery. As he was recovering, he received a call from his lawyers: the court had reinstated the jury verdict. He was woozy from pain medication, but he delivered the news to Katie with a joke straight out of her 1980s childhood: "This is Publishers Clearing House," he said. "You've won!" Katie wrote on Facebook, "Is this for real? Congratulations Dad on this monumental journey! You deserve this victory and your justice! I love you!" Matt wrote, "Time to pay up you assholes!"

Offline, the celebration was more muted. It is unclear how long it will take before the money arrives. Katie notes that she recanted nearly a decade ago. Every part of the process has moved slowly. "Somebody's going to have to put a check in my hand, I think, before I really believe it," Ray says.

Even with the money, Katie knows there will be a lingering resentment towards the investigators. "Money doesn't give you twenty years of your life back," she says. "If you don't have someone stand up and say I f-ed up, and I apologize,' and own it, you're going to have some frustration always. It's an exciting victory. But a complicated one."

Bitterness toward the investigators had been something to bond over, and a place to turn to avoid their most contentious debate: DeAnne. She did not protest as her children grew close to her former husband, but she also never acknowledged his innocence. Matt and DeAnne are "civil," Matt says, but barely.

Katie, who was always able to live with conflicting narratives, has managed to stay close to both parents. "I can't live my mom's truth. She is a bitter ex-wife, and as much as I love her, I'm not going to live her truth anymore," she said at the trial. Still, she is protective of her mother, believing she earnestly thought her children were being hurt and tried to protect them. This makes it difficult to hear Ray and Matt complain about DeAnne. "At the end of the day it was harder for me than them," she says.

Once or twice a year, Ray flies from Los Angeles to Sacramento to visit Katie and Matt, and he plans to move closer to them when the lawsuit money comes through. Matt and Katie wish he'd stop waiting. They sometimes sound like parents who chide their children for not visiting home often enough, but with a sharper edge; Katie, who now works as a dialysis technician and is raising her stepdaughter and two of her own children with Mike, worries that time is precious when so much has already disappeared.

Ray worked security after he left prison, but he stopped during the trial and has not returned. He self-published a book about his experiences and still hopes to use the psychology PhD he earned in prison. Matt's transformation has stuck; he's happily partnered, with a young son and daughter, and when they came along he decided to be a stay-at-home dad, in part because he knew what it was like to grow up without a father around.

Matt's account has the feel of a conversion narrative: he was lost, but admitting his primal, early sin—lying about his father—absolved him of the rest.

During one of these visits a year ago, they lounged around Katie's kitchen island, listening to the squeals of Katie and Matt's children from the other room. Ray rolled through his memories of being a police officer. The mood was jovial until Ray started talking about how much he missed them while in prison; he kept photos of them hidden in his cell, taking them out late at night and trying to imagine how their faces had changed. He began to cry, and his children tried to cheer him up. Then the grandchildren raced through the kitchen, and Ray broke into a smile. "I've been trying to make as many memories as I can," he said, "as long as I've got left."

One of his favorite stories, which he tells more often than any of the prison yarns, is of the first time he arrived at Katie's house. He was so afraid of Katie's reaction, he says, but when the door opened, his first sight was his daughter holding his sixteen-month-old granddaughter, Mia. She was a mirror image of Katie the last time he'd seen her, more than two decades earlier. "It was just like all the years had been washed away," Ray says, "and there was Katie."

With a little trick of the mind, he could make it feel like he'd never left.

Ray Spencer wearing his class ring after obtaining a PhD in psychology while in prison. (Mark Mahaney)

Photography by Mark Mahaney.