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Open house nightmare

Kalamazoo's Kelly Brewer survives a convicted murderer's brutal attack

In the dimly lit, unfinished basement of the quaint 1930s colonial-style house that only hours earlier opened for a showing, REALTOR® Kelly Todd Brewer fought furiously for her life.

With her back against the cold, concrete floor, Brewer struggled for the smallest of breaths — anything to ward off the blackness that was quickly engulfing her. But the iron gripped fingers of a convicted murderer, Timothy Forshee, only closed more tightly. Even with two thick turtlenecks, Brewer recalls, worn to ward off the chilly November 9, 2003, air, the pain was very real and the terror unspeakable.

“I started thinking about my girls,” Brewer said. The 42-year-old REALTOR® from Kalamazoo has twin daughters. “I thought, ‘Oh, my God I’m never going to see them again.’ I thought about my dad who had died two years earlier. Then I knew I was going to die. And then, believe it or not, you think about your obituary. I thought, ‘Oh, my God, they are going to find my dead body in the basement and the obituary is going to read “Dead REALTOR® strangled to death at open house.””

Air finally came when Brewer, of all things, played dead. Forshee let go and Brewer sucked in the dank, cold air, grateful for the chance to live. Still groggy and unsure of what to do next, she did everything she could do not to panic and, amazingly, started to talk.

She begged for her life, told Forshee about her children and, most importantly, told him that she wanted to live. She would do anything he asked, just let her live. Then, slowly, after what seemed like hours (in reality, was minutes) the strategy worked and Forshee started answering.

“I asked for permission to sit up, which he let me do,” Brewer explained. “I asked him if I had said or done something to offend him. I mean, I still couldn’t figure out why he had done this to me. I was still prepared for him to rape me. I was still prepared that that was going to happen.

“I asked him if I had reminded him of someone who had done something bad to him. I didn’t know who I was dealing with here. Then I asked him if I reminded him of someone who had done something bad to someone he cared about, and he said ‘yes.’ But then he said that was no excuse.”

Eventually the rapport grew and Forshee began to act like he was concerned about Brewer. He started rubbing her back, shoulders and hair. Brewer said she intentionally acted submissive, so as not to startle or provoke her would-be-killer, and eventually got the nerve to ask for permission to stand up so she could somehow escape.

Forshee granted her wish. Fighting back the urge to scream and flee, Brewer led Forshee back up the basement steps. She slowly put her coat on, took her cell phone from the dining room table, and, with Forshee in tow, exited the house.

“In some ways it was almost an out-of-body experience,” Brewer recalls. “I felt like the man upstairs stepped in and he took over, and I felt like my dad was there and was directing me on what to say and how to behave. I humanized myself. I wasn’t an object and I would do whatever he wanted, whatever he needed. I remember asking him if he needed a million bucks. I tried to inject some humor into this thing, in this situation — which was just bizarre.

“Most importantly, I kept my back to him. I remembered reading in a book to try not to look at my assailant because that may give him another measure of confidence that you’re not going to be able to readily identify him, so he may be more likely to let you go and get away.”

As Forshee opened Brewer's car door for her, the cell phone rang. It was Brewer's husband. Again, Brewer fought the impulse to scream for help, especially with Forshee standing only inches from her. So, as her husband asked if everything was all right, she forced herself to reply "yes," and told him she was on the way home.

That's when Forshee hopped on his bike, which was parked behind Brewer's car, and rode away. Brewer immediately got into her car, locked the doors and called her husband. She told him to take the children and get out of the house, and go to a friend's home where she would meet them and call the police.

Her call would eventually lead to Forshee's arrest. Earlier this year, the convicted murderer pleaded guilty to charges of second-degree murder for killing a woman in 2001, and assault with intent to commit murder in Brewer's case. Under terms of a plea agreement, he was sentenced to two concurrent terms of 25 to 50 years in prison.

Just like any other open house

If you think that there might be some sixth sense that kicks in when you're about to be attacked, you're wrong. Brewer admits that when she saw Forshee enter the home there was nothing odd about his behavior. No warning signs. No tingles. Nothing. Nothing, that is, except hindsight.

At 5:05 p.m., five minutes after the close of the open house, Forshee peeked his head in the door and asked if she was still showing the house. Not wanting to miss out on a potential buyer, Brewer invited him in.

Forshee was wearing sweat pants, and said that he was riding his bike in the neighborhood when he saw the open house sign. He was very tan, soft spoken, polite and wore a diamond-studded earring.

"He was a tall guy, reasonably good looking, not anyone I would have been attracted to, but well groomed," Brewer said. "He wore a lot of cologne, too. He was obviously a guy who very much cared about his looks."

Forshee immediately struck up a conversation and seemed genuinely interested in the house, saying that he was always charmed by an older home's characteristics. After Brewer excused herself to meet another late arriving group, Forshee was left to explore the home by himself.

Once the group left, she met again with Forshee who was waiting for her at the top of the stairs, on the second floor of the home. He asked to see the attic and actually took the time to pull open the hidden ladder from the ceiling and crawled around. It made Brewer a bit uneasy.

"Then he started asking if it would be possible to bring his girlfriend back the next day to look at the house," she said. "Looking back, I think he was really trying to determine whether he should assault me then and there or if he should set it up for the following day at a private showing."

She quickly dismissed the feeling and continued the tour, anxious to get him out of the house so she could return to her family.

It was then he asked to see the basement.

He stood at the bottom of the steps and started inquiring about the furnace. Brewer descended to the basement and led him through a doorway that separated the finished half of the basement with the unfinished part where the mechanics were. Brewer stood in the doorway and turned to leave when Forshee attacked her from behind.

The aftermath

Brewer took time off after the attack. Much of her time in April was spent at the courthouse in Kalamazoo, attending Forshee's trial. She said one of her young daughters still has trouble sleeping, worrying that her mommy is going to be hurt when she goes to work.

Brewer had the opportunity to give a victim impact statement to Forshee at the trial before he was sentenced.

"I nearly lost my life while simply doing my job so that you could enjoy the thrill of the kill," Brewer told Forshee, who stood with his back turned away from his victim. "Your actions unnerved and incensed my friends, my colleagues and many, if not most, REALTORS® in this community."

It wasn't until late spring, early summer that Brewer started showing homes again. She said she's received incredible support from fellow REALTORS® and the community in general.

In fact, she's become a hot topic in the Kalamazoo area, sparking plenty of discussion about what

can be done to protect REALTORS® who are very vulnerable when showing homes at unfamiliar properties to strangers.

“ This has definitely changed the way I do business,” Brewer said. “Just from reading things on the Internet, I know there was this one lady who was attacked and now the only way she does business is by referral. She just isn’t going to deal with someone that is a total unknown. That obviously is going to limit her, but there are trade-offs. Would you rather be safe and alive or make ton of money?”

According the National Association of REALTORS® Safety Survey, conducted in 2003, 67 percent of participating REALTORS® experienced safety concerns, incidents or other harassing situations while working as a REALTOR®.

The North Carolina Association of REALTORS® states that 21 real estate professionals were murdered while on the job in the U.S. in 2000. Between 1982 and 2000, 206 agents died as a result of violent assaults. Many more were raped, beaten or robbed.

In response to Brewer’s case, and the above statistics, REALTORS® at the Greater Kalamazoo Association of REALTORS® have created a safety committee that is considering making brochures and events that highlight REALTOR® safety. There is even talk about creating an agent alert system, where REALTORS® could call or e-mail the association to let others know that there may be suspects willing to do REALTORS® harm.

“ We need to have awareness of who these individuals are,” Brewer explained. “It’s too easy for it to just get blown off. Particularly, if there had not necessarily been a crime committed because that doesn’t meant that someone won’t step over the line eventually. That’s what happened with this guy; he did a lot of things for a lot of years and got away with it. All because people didn’t get in his face or didn’t report it.

“ I know he was kicked out of a couple tanning salons because he made the employees very uncomfortable. But, specifically, in the REALTOR® community, any incident people may have had with him should have been brought to everyone’s attention.”

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720 North Washington Avenue • P.O. Box 40725 • Lansing, Michigan 48901-7925
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