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Ex-Lisker Juror Couldn't Stay Away

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The slight, frail woman sat alone in the back of the courtroom, hands folded in her lap.

She watched the proceedings with keen interest, at times craning her neck to hear the testimony. She looked at the balding man in orange prison garb and wondered if he recognized her after all these years.

Lorraine Maxwell, 76, couldn't stay away, even though the thought of fighting rush-hour traffic on the 101 Freeway and driving downtown from Van Nuys terrified her.

Curiosity, tinged with regret, compelled her to be there. If Bruce Lisker was going to present evidence of his innocence, she had to hear it for herself.

Twenty years ago, she and 11 other jurors convicted Bruce Lisker, then 20, of murdering his mother.

Earlier this week, Lisker was in federal court, watching as his lawyers called witnesses who challenged key aspects of the prosecution's case against him.

Maxwell sat through hours of their testimony. Listening intently, she grimaced when the facts clashed with what she and the other jurors were told during Lisker's trial.

"I just felt that I had to come," Maxwell said. "I think about this every day....

How terrible that he's been in prison all these years. I know it wasn't my fault, but I still feel some responsibility. I want to do whatever I can to help him.

"I just feel he didn't do it."

She'd gone to the federal courthouse on her own, and she did nothing to advertise her presence. At one point, she introduced herself to Lisker's stepmother, Joy Mitchell, and expressed regret about the verdict.

Maxwell was 56 years old and working at Prudential Securities in Encino when she served on the Lisker jury. Lisker was accused of killing his mother, Dorka, 66, by bludgeoning her with a Little League trophy and stabbing her with two steak knives.

Lisker has said he came home, found the front door locked and ran to the rear of the house, where he looked through a window and saw his mother lying in the front hallway. He said he broke in and rushed to her aid.

But police thought he was lying. The teenager had a drug problem and a history of fighting with his mother. Police believed that he attacked her when she caught him stealing money from her purse.

At the trial, the prosecutor, Phillip Rabichow, told the jury that Lisker left bloody shoeprints at the crime scene. Rabichow also argued that Lisker could not have glimpsed his mother's body through a window at the rear of the house, as he said he did.

If he was lying about that, Rabichow said in his closing argument, he was lying about everything.

Maxwell said it was "extremely difficult" to convict Lisker, perhaps because she had two sons of her own.

"He was so young. It was hard to believe he would do something so horrible," she said.

Ultimately, though, she said she could not ignore the evidence against him.

"Everything pointed to his guilt," she recalled. "There was nothing pointing to his innocence. We had no choice."

Maxwell said she remembers little about the day the jury delivered its verdict.

“When it was over, I just went out into the hall and cried,” she said. “It was very traumatic.”

After the trial, Maxwell went back to her job at Prudential, where she processed trades for brokers. She tried to settle back into her life with her teenage son in their apartment in Van Nuys.

She continued to have nightmares for months about the grisly nature of the crime, but the case eventually faded with time. Only occasionally did she think of Bruce Lisker.

That changed last May when Maxwell saw an article about the case in The Times. She could hardly believe what she had read. Key evidence against Lisker, she learned, had since been proved false.

She was astounded that a bloody shoeprint that Rabichow said Lisker had left at the crime scene had actually come from someone else’s shoes. She was crushed to learn that a crime scene reenactment by The Times had convinced Rabichow that Lisker may indeed have been able to see his mother from the rear of the house.

She also read about another suspect who was never even mentioned at trial. That suspect, Mike Ryan, was at the Lisker home the day before the killing, had a history of violence, admitted being in a knife fight the day of the slaying and provided police with a false alibi for the time of the murder. Ryan was later convicted of armed robbery and sentenced to six years in prison for threatening a woman in San Francisco with a knife. He killed himself in 1996 with a combination of alcohol and heroin.

Maxwell said tears were streaming down her face before she even finished the article.

“We didn’t know there was another suspect,” Maxwell said. “We didn’t know that footprint didn’t belong to Bruce. That alone would have been reasonable doubt.”

Maxwell said she was particularly troubled by the revelation that Lisker might have been able to see his mother through the window. She said jurors had asked to go to the crime scene to look through the windows but were told that the house was being

remodeled.

“That was not true,” she said, a trace of anger in her voice.

“You go in there assuming they’re going to tell you all the facts,” Maxwell said.

“It’s really very unfair.... Now we have to go through this anguish of knowing that we sent an innocent man to prison.”

When Maxwell learned about the problems with the evidence, she immediately called the only other juror she knew how to reach, Anthony G. Kent, whom she had bumped into at a funeral years after the trial. She told him about what she had read.

“We were very shocked, and, to be honest, quite angry,” recalled Kent, a 41-year-old Reseda resident. “I know this has been very hard on her.”

That same morning, Maxwell placed another call to her longtime friend Holly Russo.

“I can’t believe I convicted this man,” Russo recalled Maxwell saying.

Russo said her friend thinks about the case constantly and complains that crucial information was withheld from the jury.

“I know she felt bad about convicting him, but that was the evidence they had,” Russo said. “Now she is beside herself.”

After speaking to Kent and Russo, Maxwell received a call from a private investigator for Lisker. He was calling jurors to see whether any would make a sworn statement saying they would not have convicted Lisker based on the latest evidence. Maxwell agreed.

In the days and weeks that followed, Maxwell said she couldn’t stop thinking about Lisker. She tried to imagine what his life has been like in prison and shuddered at what came to mind.

A Catholic, Maxwell said she even considered talking to a priest about the feelings of guilt she was experiencing.

“I decided not to, because I know he’d tell me it wasn’t my fault,” she said. “Well, I know it’s not my fault, but that’s really no consolation.”

At least eight jurors who read the Times article said they now believe that Lisker should have been acquitted, or at the very least deserves a new trial.

But only Maxwell has shown up in court. Before Monday, she said, the thought of driving downtown was “unthinkable.” She’d been rear-ended by another driver five years ago, and she was wary of fighting freeway traffic.

Yet on three mornings this week, she drove her green 1998 Buick Regal down the 101 to the courthouse. She had been closely following developments in the newspaper. When she read about the hearing in federal court, she asked herself, “Can I do this?”

She took out her maps to see whether she could get there on surface streets and finally decided she had to take the freeway.

Not all of the testimony went well for Lisker. On Wednesday, correctional officials and psychologists testified that Lisker had confessed to killing his mother. Lisker’s lawyers called them phony confessions offered out of desperation by a man trying to minimize his time in prison.

Maxwell said she remains convinced of Lisker’s innocence and expects him to be exonerated.

“When that happens,” she said, “maybe I’ll have some peace of mind.”

Scott Glover is a former investigative reporter for the Los Angeles Times.