



THE **Sins** OF THE MOTHER

FOR DECADES,
EDITH SANDERS ABUSED AND
TORTURED CHILDREN

**in her shadowy foster home in London, Ont.
It took three of her victims nearly 50 years
to put her in jail for it. And now they won't
rest until the authorities who failed
to protect them face justice, too.**

by David Hayes



Edith Sanders, in an undated photo, served a third of a four-year sentence for assaulting the children in her care. Opposite: Sanders's house at 845 Princess Street in London, Ont.

I**N THE PHOTO, WHICH** looks to have been taken in the late 1960s, four people stand in a kitchen. Sheer white curtains, wooden cupboards, yellow walls. In the foreground is Yvonne Overton, then in her mid-twenties and wearing a white dress with puffy sleeves, taking a drag on a cigarette. She is with her mother, Edith Sanders, who is immaculately coiffed and wearing a blue frock, her hands clasped as if in prayer – although, as I am learning, there was nothing beneficent about her.

It would be an altogether ordinary snapshot if it weren't for the alarming figure standing in the background. It's difficult to determine her age, but she is, in fact, in her early thirties. She is slightly overweight with uncombed hair and she's wearing a too-tight yellow cardigan, her arms drawn protectively in front of her.

But it's the face that gets your attention. The expression is haunted, like that of a prisoner, the eyes staring fearfully into the camera.

"That's Beatrice at 845 Princess Avenue, where she got the shit kicked out of her every day," Kim Campbell, Beatrice's foster sister, tells me today, her lower lip quivering. "The most savage beatings you could imagine."

We're sitting in the sunny kitchen of Campbell's home in Mount Brydges, a rural community southwest of London, Ont., where Campbell, 50, a mother of four, is pulling photos from her enormous collection. Each family snap is a little off-kilter – a hollow look in a young woman's eyes, a sense of foreboding. Then there are the pictures taken for evidence. Campbell pauses at one showing a heavy green army belt used to beat her when she was in her early teens. Then, another: of a cattle prod, an instrument of torture used on both her and Beatrice. At one point, she shows me a faded green scar – the letter *E* – on her right arm where Sanders, her foster mother, branded her with a dog tattooer.

From the late 1940s to the 1980s, Sanders established a record of tormenting the underprivileged children she took into her care,



along with the mistreatment of her own biological daughter Yvonne. If it's possible to measure such things, Beatrice Feick, a foster child who arrived at Sanders's house at age 14, suffered most; Sanders oversaw brutal sexual abuse of Feick, the details of which, brought to light decades later, are unfathomably repulsive.

The grisly acts could have been stopped, say the sisters who endured them. But for years, whenever any of them tried to alert officials at organizations responsible for protecting children, they say, they met a wall of denial. Ultimately, it would take 50 years to bring these abuses to trial, both with the criminal prosecution of Sanders and now in a landmark civil suit seeking an as-yet-unspecified settlement for damages against the city of London's police service and the Children's Aid Society (CAS) of London and Middlesex. (The sisters initially retained a London law firm, but have been represented by Ron Manes, a principal in the Toronto firm Torkin Manes, since 2006. Manes declined to comment for this article.)

"When we first started all this," says Overton, "it was [about] getting the old lady, to get justice for Beatrice." But now the sisters feel that blame should be brought to bear on the police and the CAS for not rescuing them from a condition they knew about, or ought to have known about.

Despite the odds against them – and decades filled with nearly insurmountable obstacles – these three ordinary and extremely determined women are searching for justice. Their perseverance is a reminder of the powerful and >>

Edith Sanders (second from right), with foster child Beatrice Feick (far left), daughter Yvonne Overton (second from left) and a boarder.

universal human drive to come to terms with issues in the past and resolve them.

Yet, having been involved in this story for two years, I'm left wondering if it's possible to remake your life after this kind of abuse – and wondering what happens when the crusade to seek closure necessarily keeps you trapped reliving the trauma over and over.

EDITH SANDERS WAS 81 WHEN SHE WAS convicted and imprisoned for her crimes. On October 4, 2002, a judge found her guilty of 10 counts of assault, holding her responsible for decades of savage beatings and humiliation against Yvonne Overton, Kim Campbell and Beatrice Feick. In his sentencing report, the judge wrote: “I found there to be an overriding theme of domination and systemic brutalization. . . . The evidence

“I found there to be an overriding theme of **DOMINATION AND SYSTEMIC BRUTALIZATION**. The evidence I heard was more appalling than any I have experienced.”

their failures. They also want a settlement large enough to provide care for Feick, who is in fragile health.

Like survivors of any atrocity, the sisters are obsessed with oral history, documents and photographs, which, when pieced together, represent the truth of their experience. It's as though they feel there's not enough evidence in the world to assure them that they will be believed.

Their story begins in what is, today, a rundown, two-storey house at 227 Hill Street on the fringe of downtown London, a rough-around-the-edges neighbourhood that hasn't changed much in half a century. In 1952, Feick's family, in nearby St. Mary's, was breaking up and the 11 children were sent, temporarily in most cases, to the homes of relatives or into foster care. The house where Feick, then 14, was sent was a kind of semi-official foster home-cum-orphanage (regulations were more casual than they are today) run by Edith Sanders, whose nickname was Blondie.

Edith's husband, James Sanders, who worked as a carpenter in the construction industry, lived at the house, although it is said they separated in the late '40s. (Afterwards, he and his estranged wife slept in separate rooms and Edith took other lovers.) In addition to Joan and Yvonne, the couple's two biological daughters, three adopted children and Edith's mentally disabled sister, Helen, Edith took in orphans and unwed mothers (Kim Campbell was the child of one of these women). Sanders also operated a kennel for dogs and, at various times, raised monkeys, snakes, swans, geese, pigeons, canaries, raccoons, ocelots and a crocodile. (A *London Free Press* article from the early 1960s refers to Beaver, a capuchin monkey, as the most “popular resident of Hill Street.”) In this overcrowded environment Sanders also had her boarders: men who were often petty criminals.

For Feick, the abuse began approximately a year after she arrived, allegedly after Sanders accused her of having an affair with her husband. According to testimony accepted by the trial judge in the criminal proceedings, Sanders assaulted Feick with her fists, belts, a hockey stick, an electrical cord, a cast-iron frying pan, heated knives and a cattle prod. At different times, she held a hot iron against the girl's skin and once pushed her down the stairs.

Many of the stories Campbell and Overton have told >>



Yvonne Overton (left), with Beatrice Feick (centre) and Kim Campbell, during Edith Sanders's criminal trial: “After all this time, we finally got the old bitch.”

heard was more appalling than any I have experienced in excess of my 40 years since my call to the bar.” Sanders became the oldest female inmate in Canada's federal prison system until she was paroled in May 2004 after serving a third of her four-year sentence. She died a few months later of natural causes.

At the sentencing, Overton says, “I remember going to sit with Beatrice to hold her hand because, finally, after all this time, we finally got the old bitch.” Their civil case was launched to force the institutions that the women feel let them down to acknowledge

me are even more bizarre. Once, the sisters saw Feick locked in a cage with a dead monkey. Another time, Sanders killed a fluffy white bunny that Campbell had lovingly cared for, placing its still-beating heart in Campbell's hand before serving the pet for dinner.

Sanders exposed Feick's genitalia to caustic fluids and made her sit in a bathtub filled with either scalding hot water or cold water mixed with snow. Feick was also sexually abused by boarders, often under Sanders's supervision.

Yvonne Overton, too, was molested. Usually it involved inappropriate touching, but one boarder raped her when she was five. The man was charged and went to jail, but, to the little girl's horror, when he was released, Sanders allowed him to resume living in the house.

Campbell, Overton and Feick say they told teachers, police and Children's Aid officials at various times about the abuse, but their claims apparently seemed so extreme as to be preposterous. (Of all the children who lived with Sanders, these three women had a special bond despite the 20-year age span; Feick played a nurturing role and became like a mother or older sister.)

In 1964, when Campbell was six, Sanders moved the family to 845 Princess Avenue in Old East London, another down-at-the-heels neighbourhood. A teacher suspected trouble at home and arranged for a CAS social worker to interview Campbell. Later, the social worker contacted Sanders, and Campbell was beaten. After that, Campbell says, "I just clammed up. I thought, 'Hey, these people aren't helping me, they're against me.'"

IT'S NOW LATE AFTERNOON IN HER kitchen, and Campbell sets aside the photos. Shaking her head, she says, "You're looking at me, a 13-year-old child. The allegations I made to whoever would listen are something out of a Stephen King novel. Troubled kids from dysfunctional families often tell stories that aren't true. ... Who are you going to believe, the 13-year-old or the apparently respectable woman who takes in children?"

Among many puzzling aspects of the story, one is Sanders's husband, James, who is fondly

remembered by the children. Since it's surely impossible he could have lived with Edith for so long without knowing what was going on, I asked everyone why he didn't do something about the violence. Campbell and Overton explained that he was an alcoholic and unable or unwilling to take on his formidable wife.

In 1964, when she was 20, Overton moved out of the home but returned to visit and briefly moved back when she was 28. Meanwhile, in 1971, 14-year-old Campbell was removed from Sanders's care, placed in a group home and made a ward of the CAS after a teacher and a CAS worker again reported signs of abuse. Campbell also sometimes returned to visit Sanders, maintaining a relationship, she would later say, to keep an eye on Feick and the other children. Although it's hard to imagine why either Overton or Campbell would return to the abusive household, it's a common response. Sanders had effectively isolated them, controlling their comings and goings, creating a sense of her own invincibility, while drawing her victims back into her orbit.

For Feick, there was no escape. Utterly cowed, described by the judge in the criminal trial as "in a state of near slavery," she tried to leave several times as an adult but was always returned by authorities. With little education, and timid after years of brutality, Feick must have credibly fit Sanders's claim that she was not mentally competent, another measure of her near-total domination. Finally, in 1985, at the age of 47, Feick slipped a note to a visitor, who gave it to the police. Later, a Family Services London official arrived with the police to remove her from the home.

THE PHENOMENON OF CHILD WELFARE HAS EVOLVED since the 19th century, when an apprenticeship – essentially indentured servitude – or prison was the best orphaned children could hope for unless they were lucky enough to fall under the care of a church or a charitable individual. Shortly before the turn of the century, reformers championing children's rights had succeeded in passing the Act for the Prevention of Cruelty to and Better Protection of Children, which promoted formal adoption, institutional care and foster homes. This led to the creation of children's aid societies, with their power to remove children from homes where they were being mistreated.

By mid-century, agencies like London's CAS were handling most adoptions and supervising arrangements with foster parents, but "private" adoptions – arranged by doctors, lawyers, nurses and ordinary citizens, like Sanders, >>



Beatrice Feick, pictured here at 14 or 15, was a smart, happy young woman before she was sent to live with Edith Sanders, who accused her of having an affair with her husband.

often for a fee – were legal, and unlicensed foster homes, like the one she operated, weren't uncommon.

“Legislation supporting mandatory safety of children wasn't strong enough at that time,” says Alan Leschied, a psychologist focusing on child welfare who teaches at the University of Western Ontario. “And back in the '50s and '60s there was a cultural norm that what happened within families stayed within families. Even domestic violence.”

It was the combined failure of the CAS and the police to identify a sociopath in Sanders, the sisters say, that left them damaged and angry. Overton lived in the shadow of her older sister. (Joan, Sanders's favourite, left home before the abuse escalated and refuses to talk about her past.) Along with

her own beatings, Overton was often, in her words, “forced to be an accomplice” when her mother called upon her to abuse Feick, an experience that haunts Overton to this day. A psychiatrist who saw her from 2000 to 2002 identified depression, sleep and appetite impairment, and feelings of guilt and worthlessness. And a psychologist who examined her in 2004 concluded that she

suffered from “chronic post-traumatic stress disorder syndrome.”

What is perhaps most astounding about this case is the documentation I discovered revealing that the CAS knew about suspicions of baby brokering, assaults and “immoral behaviour” at the Sanders home dating back to the 1940s. According to CAS records, in 1945, Sanders apparently tried to get a baby by impersonating a social worker, and a year later, after she left her two biological children, Joan and Yvonne, unattended, a report read: “Efforts were made to encourage Mrs. Sanders to have psychiatric help through the Mental Health Clinic due to erratic behaviour, gross exaggeration and lying.”

LIVING TODAY IN A YELLOW-PAINTED cottage in farm country outside Ingersoll,

Ont., Yvonne Overton continues to bear the scars from her past. She's on medication for nervous disorders that can leave her bedridden, and she periodically suffers from bed-wetting. Nevertheless, she's lively and gregarious at 64, welcoming me into her home, which is filled with plants, framed photos of horses and a collection of baby dolls in a hutch in the living room. She's a slim woman wearing a white blouse, beige cotton pants and red bedroom slippers. Like Campbell, she's most comfortable telling the story by talking about family photographs, news clippings and old letters, and she often becomes visibly agitated.

At one point, when I ask her what she would say to Sanders if she were here today, Overton stops picking up photos and her voice takes on an hysterical edge. “What would I say to her? Boy, did you have it coming to you when you got it!” Sobbing, she goes on: “We finally got you. How do you like your stupid daughter now? Where are you right now? You're in hell!”

In 1964, Overton briefly dated a young police officer named Ted Lane. After he observed cuts and bruises on her face, she told him about the abuse and said she wanted to escape. She wrote a detailed letter and Lane accompanied her to the police station with it. According to Overton, Lane's boss reacted as other police officials later would, with disbelief and a disinclination to pursue a domestic case. He looked at it and said to Lane, “Do you realize what could happen if this wasn't true? I'm not touching it.”

In a 2002 interview, Lane, by then retired from the force, confirmed that Sanders's name was well-known around the police department and that he had presented Overton's letter to a senior officer. Later, he understood that no action had been taken because Feick wasn't complaining. He was advised by his staff sergeant not to hang around the house or with the people who lived there and frequented it.

“Nobody would help,” a tearful Overton tells me. “The police won't do anything. Children's Aid wouldn't help. How many times we've tried and tried and tried. Nobody would believe it and nobody would touch Edith Sanders.”

ONCE AWAY FROM SANDERS, FEICK, WHO HAS MANY health problems, lived in a home run by the Sisters of St. Joseph and, later, in several apartments with assistance from social-service agencies. Occasionally she spoke to Campbell on the phone. One day, in 1997, after Feick had had an epileptic seizure, Campbell called to see if she was all right. Feick admitted that Sanders had been hounding her, sometimes calling in the middle of the night to threaten or cajole her into returning to the house. “Can you stop the old bitch?” asked an agitated Feick. “She won't leave me alone.”

Enraged that Sanders was still tormenting Feick, Campbell finally found the courage to do something about >>



Edith Sanders, in 2003, at a London, Ont., courthouse, before her sentencing. She became the oldest female inmate in the federal prison system.



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the woman who had abused Feick for so many years. She said, "Beatrice, absolutely."

She took Feick to a sexual-abuse clinic, and a doctor referred them to the London police force's sexual assault and child abuse division, where Detective Sergeant Kelly Johnson was a noted community leader in fighting domestic violence. Johnson, then nearly 30, was the daughter of a former deputy police chief. She was street-smart, professional and empathetic. Although skeptical at first, she soon became convinced, especially after meeting Feick in person.

Johnson investigated the sisters' claims, and Sanders was eventually charged with assault. Stories emerged that Sanders was well-known to local police. There was a suggestion that she was personally acquainted with a former police chief and that she had been a low-level informer.

I had planned to speak with Johnson about this and other details of the sisters' case, but our interview would never take place. The 40-year-old police inspector committed suicide in June 2007, after shooting and killing 57-year-old retired superintendent David Lucio, with whom she allegedly had an extramarital affair. It was yet another bizarre twist in an already gothic tale.

IN THE 1990S, FEICK GOT IN TOUCH with one of her biological brothers, Bob. His wife, Claire, has become her sister-in-law's prime guardian and protector. For years Bob Feick had understood that after the family broke up, his sister had ended up living happily in London with no interest in contacting former family members. As the tales of horror became clear, the Feicks were aghast. When I visit their home outside London, Bob tells me, "It's awful to think your own flesh

and blood was treated in this manner."

Today, Beatrice lives in a lovely, private assisted-living residence not far from the Feicks. Her health has worsened and her brother and sister-in-law play a major role in supporting her emotionally and financially. She suffers from nightmares in which roomers from the Sanders home are coming to torment her. She can become so upset when reminded of the past that Claire tightly restricts how often she sees Campbell and Overton, who find it painful not to have contact with her.

With her white hair and gentle manner, Beatrice, 70, is the Hallmark image of a sweet grandmother, despite a bit of salty language, acquired from half a life living with Sanders. But minutes into a conversation with her at her brother's house, I see a profound fragility. When I ask her how she came to live with Sanders, she replies in a singsong voice: "My mom had to go to the hospital. I wanted to go to Grandma's house. When [Sanders] came and got me, I was in St. Mary's at Grandpa's house." Later, when I ask if Sanders had sent her to school, she replies, "Yes. Then I was accused of everything after I was 15. Then she started to do all the stuff that I didn't want to do. All those things."

It would be easy for strangers to assume she was born mentally disabled. She looks 10 years older than her age and speaks in a childlike way, often not quite following a conversation and answering questions tangentially. But Feick was a smart, happy 14-year-old young woman when she arrived at Sanders's home. In 2004, she was evaluated by the Criminal Injuries Compensation Board, which concluded: "Every facet of the Applicant's being has been affected by the abuse. ... These include her self-care, trust and relationship building. ... the abuse irretrievably derailed >>

all normal lifetime experiences such as friendships, marriage, children and career.”

AS OF THIS WRITING, THE CIVIL SUIT IS DRAGGING ITS way through the system. It will be hard to prove culpability after so many decades, with documents lost, key individuals no longer alive, the memories of the living clouded and so many interests at stake. But winning the case would formally establish, as the criminal trial against Sanders didn't, the failure of “the system” to protect children – whom Supreme Court Justice Rosalie Abella once described as “a vulnerable group at its most vulnerable” – from harm.

But a trial of any kind is, to put it bluntly, a game. Victims invest enormous quantities of hope in the outcome, yet, ultimately, the results depend upon the talents of lawyers and the always unpredictable rulings of the referee – a judge. The much-sought-after “closure” so often talked about by victims is poorly defined (even by victims themselves).

And what defines closure for victims of abuse such as Campbell, Overton and Feick? Wounds this deep can't be healed by litigation, and financial compensation can't erase the nightmare of an abusive past.

When asked how she feels about the civil suit, Campbell says: “It's not revenge. It's that I know that there's a kid somewhere out there who's not getting help. I just want to know that when a child tells [the authorities] stuff, like I did, they listen to that kid. Investigate, investigate, investigate. Even if they think the kid is a pathological liar, investigate. I don't want anything like this to ever happen again.”

Recently, I asked her whether she could imagine what it will be like when it's all over. “I picture myself going to where Beatrice lives and saying, ‘Let's go for a walk,’” she says. “It's a beautiful day, when the wind's up in the trees a wee bit and there are flowers. I would take hold of her hand, look into her face and say, ‘It took us a long time, but we conquered what we had to conquer. It's all done. We can move on now.’” ■

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