

Born A Hostage

Terror in the maternity room—a man with a gun, a woman about to give birth and two brave nurses

By Robert C. Yeager

In the moments before the drama began, Margie Wyler observed the same quiet ritual she'd followed for a decade. The thirty-seven-year-old obstetrics nurse systematically readied the linens and instruments before calling for the delivering physician, Glade Curtis, M.D., to come to room 2310. The patient, twenty-two-year-old Christian Downey, was nestled in a cushion of pillows, numb from the waist down with an epidural in preparation for the birth of her first child. Her sister Carre, nineteen, was chattering nervously as twenty-year-old Adam Cisneros, the baby's father, sighed. "Relax, Carre," he said. "This will happen soon enough."

It should have been a quiet night, happy with the prospect of new life. Alta View Hospital's Women's Center, in the Salt Lake City suburb of Sandy, has only twenty-four beds, yet in a typical year the center records more than fifteen hundred births. It's an ideal facility for a town that seems to be a product of a simpler time. Less than a fifteen-minute drive from the region's ski resorts, the relatively affluent community of eighty-seven thousand is marked by strong religious values, close-knit families and a low crime rate: "Sandy is the kind of place where police still investigate thefts of lawn furniture," one resident says.

But all that changed on the night of September 20, 1991, when one man, out for revenge, invaded the peace. Even today, the everyday lives of the victims are shadowed by the memory of those eighteen hours of hell.

Out for blood

At her post in the Women's Center nurse's station, shift coordinator Susan Woolley saw a muscular five-feet-nine-inch man heading down the second-floor corridor toward her. He clutched a .357 magnum revolver in his right hand and cradled a shotgun in his left arm. In horror, Susan recognized him as thirty-nine-year-old Richard Worthington, the husband of a former patient. Worthington's violent verbal and physical outbursts, which had led to his (continued)

Worthington had enough explosives to blow up the hospital



“I’m going to die tonight and so are all of you!”



At 3:23 A.M., eight-pound Caitlin Cisneros was born a hostage

commands, the women went to the nursery and rolled two newborn babies, Erich Case and Bryan Lowder, in their bassinets to the door of room 2310 and left them there.

Preoccupied with Christan Downey's labor, the group in room 2310 was unaware of the commotion outside until they heard an angry voice. "Where the f--- is Dr. Curtis? I'm here to kill his ass!"

"The voice was right outside the door," Margie Wyler recalls. "Carre and Christan looked really scared. Adam's face froze." Stifling an impulse to open the door, Margie told everyone to stay put and keep quiet. She knew Curtis was elsewhere on the ward.

But seconds later, the door burst open with a bang and the gunman stood before them. "My life was perfect!" he screamed, his blue eyes blazing. "Dr. Curtis ruined *everything*. He butchered my wife." Just before he left the room, Margie noticed the man's embroidered baseball cap, a gift the hospital once gave to all new parents. It read: "It's a boy!"

Worthington then made Susan and Karla accompany him to a nearby exit on a journey that seemed to have no clear purpose. Recalls Susan, "He took us down two flights of stairs and propped open the main entrance door as we went outside. He kept warning us, 'Don't do anything stupid.'" Staying slightly to the rear of the nurses, Worthington led them toward the hospital parking lot.

The Sandy police had already been summoned, and four officers quickly arrived on the scene and stationed themselves outside the hospital. Shortly before midnight, Worthington and the two nurses emerged from the front entrance. Forty feet away, the officers waited, guns drawn but unable to fire a shot at Worthington for fear of hitting one of the women. The gunman, seeing the police, began to curse at them, and Karla, perhaps thinking he was distracted, suddenly turned and tried to wrest the shotgun from his grasp. When he brushed her off, Karla tried to run. Without hesitation,

(continued) expulsion from coaching youth sports programs, were well known in town. But his rage had escalated still further two years earlier when Curtis performed a tubal ligation on Worthington's wife, Karen. Already the mother of eight, she had a history of miscarriages and difficult pregnancies. Worthington had initially consented to his wife's surgery, but then abruptly and vehemently changed his mind. Nevertheless, Karen went ahead with the procedure.

Afterward, Worthington had bombarded Alta View with angry phone calls, letters and threats of legal action, all aimed at Curtis. Worthington insisted that the surgery had deprived his family of an unborn daughter who was still waiting in heaven. Hospital officials finally reached an agreement with Worthington: They would not charge him for his wife's surgery, and he in turn would drop his threat of a lawsuit and never seek medical treatment there again.

Storming down the second-floor hall, Worthington ordered Susan and Karla Roth, a nurse on duty, to follow him. Acting on one of his bizarre

“ I thought, ‘He’s been yelling all night about wanting a baby girl,’ ” says Christan. “ ‘Is he going to take Caitlin away from me?’ ”

Worthington fired a shot into her back, and she fell to the ground.

Worthington grabbed Susan and yelled to the police, "Back off, or I'll kill her, too!" Quickly, he dragged her back into the Women's Center, leaving the fallen nurse. Karla, thirty-seven and the mother of four, died within minutes. It had been only her second night on the job at Alta View.

Back in room 2310, Carre sobbed hysterically. "It's going to be okay," Margie soothed. But moments later, Worthington burst back into their room with Susan and the two infant boys, wheeling them in from the corridor where they had been left. Still demanding to see Curtis, he made Adam, Carre and Susan lie down on the floor. Hearing the commotion, hospital staffers—including the hunted doctor—had been frantically grabbing infants from the nursery and helping maternity patients out of the building. Curtis made it to safety without confronting the gunman. The rest of the police force had not yet arrived, so there was no one to keep Worthington from reentering the building.

Worthington's next order was for Margie to call his wife. Karen Worthington said she would rush to the hospital and bring the couple's Mormon clergyman, who had counseled her husband in the past about his vicious temper. When Margie hung up the phone, Worthington shot it with his revolver and shattered it. "I'm going to die tonight, and so are all of you!" he screamed. Touching his shotgun to Christan's swollen belly, he told Adam to go out and bring him a black box that he had hidden outside the front entrance. Inside were rows of brown sticks and coils of wire connected to a switch.

Says Margie, "He made me yell to the cops outside that he had forty-two sticks of explosives—enough to blow up the building and everyone in it." As the terrified hostages watched Worthington work on the equipment, they realized that his threat was no bluff.

Fearfully, Margie hugged Worthington, hoping this would soften his heart enough to make him release the hostages

Born in captivity

By twelve-thirty, nearly an hour after Worthington had stormed the hospital, law officers from throughout the area scrambled to organize a command post and open negotiations with the gunman. Meanwhile, Worthington decided to move his hostages to the third floor, where Curtis and other doctors had their offices. As Margie and Adam pushed Christan in her bed, Carre and Susan carried the babies, leaving their bassinets behind.

When they reached the complex of offices, Worthington shattered the glass entryway and ordered the hostages inside. He told them to destroy files and potted plants, then shot at the telephones on the desks, disabling some of the lines.

On the floor, wrapped in blankets and immobilized by her epidural, Christan was *(continued on page 218)*

“The adult hostages knelt and prayed: ‘Dear God, please help us find a way to survive.’”



LHJ'S HOTLINE DIET

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- Cook, covered for 10 minutes. Cook uncovered until sausages are browned on all sides. Remove and chop.
2. Add oil, onion, green pepper and garlic to same skillet. Cook, stirring until tender, 10 minutes.
3. Return sausage to skillet; stir in beans and next 6 ingredients. Reduce heat to low; cover and simmer, 5 minutes.
4. Serve over rice. Garnish with red pepper. Makes 6 servings.

PER SERVING	DAILY GOAL
Calories 280	2,000(F), 2,500(M)
Total fat 5 g	60 g or less (F); 70 g or less (M)
Saturated fat 0 g	20 g or less (F); 23 g or less (M)
Cholesterol 16 mg	300 mg or less
Sodium 675 mg	2,400 mg or less
Carbohydrates 47 g	250 g or more
Protein 13 g	55 g to 90 g

BANANA-NUT BREAD

Our favorite way to use ripe bananas is to bake up some banana bread.

Prep time: 15 minutes
Baking time: 1 1/4 hours

3 cups all-purpose flour
1/4 cup granulated sugar
2 teaspoons baking powder
1/2 teaspoon baking soda

1/2 teaspoon salt
1/2 cup walnuts, toasted and chopped fine
1 1/2 cups mashed bananas (3 large)
3/4 cup firmly packed brown sugar
1/2 cup unsweetened applesauce
1/3 cup light corn-oil spread (60% fat), melted
1 large egg
1 large egg white
1 teaspoon vanilla extract

1. Heat oven to 350°F. Lightly coat 9x5-inch loaf pan with cooking spray.
2. Combine first six ingredients in medium bowl.
3. Whisk bananas, brown sugar, applesauce, corn-oil spread, egg, egg white and vanilla in bowl. Stir in dry ingredients just until moistened.
4. Spoon batter into prepared pan. Bake 1 1/4 hours, until toothpick inserted in center comes out clean. Cool in pan on wire rack 10 minutes; remove from pan and cool completely. Makes 16 servings.

PER SERVING	DAILY GOAL
Calories 210	2,000(F), 2,500(M)
Total fat 5 g	60 g or less (F); 70 g or less (M)
Saturated fat 1 g	20 g or less (F); 23 g or less (M)
Cholesterol 13 mg	300 mg or less
Sodium 204 mg	2,400 mg or less
Carbohydrates 38 g	250 g or more
Protein 4 g	55 g to 90 g

Recipes by Lisa Brainerd, Kathy Kaliban Nolan and Cynthia DePersio and from the ADA

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terrified. She no longer had the security of her hospital bed; it was too big to fit into the office, so she had been carried in. "Don't worry. Susan and I can deliver your baby," Margie assured her. Privately, however, the nurse was worried: What if Christan needed an episiotomy? Suppose there were complications? They had no instruments, sutures, gauze or anesthetic, and Christan had been fully dilated for ninety minutes. This baby couldn't wait much longer.

After telling Adam to barricade the outer doors with furniture, Worthington flipped open the black box and prepared the explosives. He alternated between ranting fits of rage and calmer moments when he talked quietly to his hostages. "Most of the time I was thinking about how to keep my mouth shut, to not say anything that might set him off," says Margie. But there were times when she was convinced that their captor would follow through

on his threats. "For a long time, I thought we would die for sure," she says. "The worst part was realizing that my children wouldn't have a mother and that my little six-month-old girl wouldn't remember me. That's when I really bawled."

But Worthington seemed to be warming to Margie. He called her "a beautiful woman" upon learning she had eleven children, and he allowed her to call her husband, Dale.

Shortly before three in the morning, Susan whispered to her colleague, "Margie, Christan *must* have that baby. The epidural is almost gone." Scrounging about, the nurses found some towels and sanitary pads, then helped the young woman into another room. "I'm scared," Christan whispered. "You heard what he said [about wanting a daughter]. What if I have a girl? Maybe my baby's safer inside."

"We don't have a choice," Susan replied. "Now do exactly as we say."

The nurses coached Christan through a slow, controlled delivery.

Having no clamp, Margie pinched the umbilical cord between her fingers to cut off the blood supply. "We got what we needed—a perfect delivery," she says. At 3:23 A.M. on September 21, eight-pound Caitlin Cisneros was born a hostage.

But the new mother, though proud of her baby, felt also "a sense of anger that I couldn't enjoy my daughter like most women," she says. "He stole the joy of birth from me. I kept thinking: All night long he's been yelling about how he wanted a baby girl. If this is what he wants, is he going to take Caitlin away from me?"

A tense standoff

"I couldn't believe this was happening in Sandy," recalls Sergeant Don Bell, Salt Lake City's senior hostage negotiator. "They never had problems in Sandy." On receiving the call about the crisis, Bell hurried to the scene. Scores of friends, family members, news media and curious onlookers had already (continued)

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Continued

gathered at Alta View. Area homes had been evacuated. SWAT teams were established on the second floor of the Women's Center, and police sharpshooters stood outside in view of the windows. But the police negotiations were having no effect. Worthington refused to cooperate, demanding to see either Curtis or his own wife. Sometimes he would pick up the phone when negotiators called him; sometimes he let it ring. Dead phones, broken conversations and other communications problems plagued officers all night.

Arriving at Alta View at eight A.M., Bell took over negotiations. For the next several hours, he attempted to call Worthington. Margie, Carre and the other hostages would often take the phone and relay messages to Worthington; Margie, in particular, relayed more than one hundred messages. Bell hoped to end the ordeal peacefully without giving in to the kidnapper's demands. "We decided that the risk was too great to allow Worthington to talk to his wife," he says.

In a bizarre scene, the adult hostages knelt in a circle and prayed while their kidnapper looped what appeared to be detonator wire around the door-knob of the makeshift delivery room. "Heavenly Father," Susan prayed, "let Richard Worthington's heart be softened. Give the police wisdom and, if it is Your will, help us find a way to survive." When they had finished, Worthington permitted them to write final messages to loved ones. Susan left her letter to her family unsigned. If it wasn't finished, she thought, maybe her life wasn't over, either.

By late morning, the effects of hunger and exhaustion started to show on everyone involved. The office was a mess from the broken glass and furniture that Worthington had smashed or shot. Attempts to negotiate the delivery of food and medical supplies had broken down.

Then, incredibly, the man who had fired guns and spewed threats all night seemed to be wearing down. He screamed less often at his captives and wept as he started talking about his

wife. "At about four P.M., he called his eight-year-old son, Spencer," says Sergeant Bell, who was listening in on a tapped line. "He asked, 'Do you still love me? Am I still your bud?' I felt a first ray of hope." Sitting nearby, Margie felt tears welling in her eyes, too. "He hung up and asked if I could talk honestly with him," she says. "He said things hadn't gone as he'd planned. He looked beaten."

Finally, Worthington agreed to surrender if he could see his wife alone for one minute. For the first time, the hostages dared to believe that the worst was truly over. But the most frightening moment was yet to come.

Using Margie as an intermediary, Sergeant Bell worked out a plan. Worthington would disconnect the wire from the explosives, put down his shotgun and give Adam his .357, then free the hostages. In return, he could talk briefly to Karen and his bishop in the lobby outside the offices. At four-thirty, the gunman removed some of the furniture barricading the door and sent Adam out. Susan and Margie were following. Worthington started toward the lobby—and then spotted SWAT team members waiting with his wife. Enraged, he herded the nurses back into the room while the police pulled Adam to safety.

As Worthington pulled the door closed, Susan pleaded with him: "Richard, we can still make this work. Let me go out and talk to them." He replied, "Oh, hell, do what you want," and she stepped back into the hall. Susan asked the police to let Karen come upstairs. When they refused, she shrieked, "But you'll let seven of us die?" before going back in.

In the meantime, Margie had phoned Bell. "My God," she shouted, "you guys lied. He's going to kill us all!" The sergeant knew she could be right: The first and last minutes of a hostage situation are usually the most dangerous. But one thought came to mind. A hostage taker is least likely to kill someone he cares for, someone who has touched him emotionally.

"I want you to put the telephone on the table," Bell told Margie, "and don't hang up. Then I *(continued)*

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Continued

want you to go over and give him a hug." The nurse said, "I don't think I can." He replied, "You *must*."

Stifling her fear, Margie crossed the room and forced herself to hug the man who had terrorized her. "The next thing I knew," she says, "Susan [carrying Erich] and I were running down the hall—free! I felt an enormous sense of joy just at being alive." Carre, holding Bryan, followed by Christan and Caitlin, were the next to leave.

Minutes later, at six P.M.—eighteen hours after the drama began—Richard Worthington walked out of the offices, then started running back in. The officers got to him in time and tackled him.

A legacy of fear

In March 1992, Worthington pleaded guilty to reduced charges of criminal homicide, aggravated burglary and eight counts of aggravated kidnapping.

Despite pleas for leniency by his family and neighbors, he was given a sentence of thirty-five years to life. A disruptive inmate who was transferred to several different prisons, Worthington hanged himself in his cell in 1993.

Margie Wyler, who now gives inspirational speeches based on her experience, went back to work at the Alta View Women's Center—which has since stepped up its security measures—just three weeks after the incident. A year later, the estranged husband of a Women's Center patient called and threatened to kill his wife. Too rattled to remain on duty, Margie went home, but not permanently. She still works at the hospital, and she credits her faith and positive outlook for her recovery. She does admit, however, "I'm more frightened by anger now."

Susan Woolley was not as quick to resume her daily life. Suffering panic attacks, flashbacks and nightmares—all classic signs of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)—she never returned to Alta View. She eventually

moved to Honolulu with her husband and returned to nursing only last summer. She also gives lectures on PTSD. "It took two and a half years of counseling and therapy for me to feel like a survivor instead of a victim," she says.

On November 1, 1994, Christan Downey returned to Alta View Hospital's Women's Center, where she gave birth to her second daughter, Alexa.

She specifically requested not to be put in Room 2310. ●

Robert C. Yeager is a writer based in San Francisco.

JOURNAL SHOPPING CENTER

YOURS, MINE AND OURS PAGES 162-165 THROUGHOUT THE HOUSE UNLESS OTHERWISE SPECIFIED: Absolutely Abbey, 203-868-1514. BEDROOM: vase, Pier I Imports, 212-206-1911; planter, Wolfman Gold & Good Co., 212-431-1888; throw, Portico Bed and Bath, 212-941-7722. KITCHEN: cutting board, Pier I Imports.

THE SHAG STORY PAGE 154 CELEBRITY PHOTOS: Smeal/Galella, Ron Galella, Shin/Celebrity Photos, Savignano/Galella, Paschal/Celebrity Photos, Fisher/LGI, Ortega/Celebrity Photos, Jordan/Celebrity Photos, Vai/Celebrity Photos, Rose/LGI, Gough/Celebrity Photos, Downie/Celebrity Photos, Volland/Celebrity Photos, Winters/Celebrity Photos, Capital Pics/LGI, Jackson/LGI.

JULIA'S GANG PAGE 192 Dinner plate and dessert plate, "Pax," J.C. Castelbajac for Bernardaud, 212-696-2432.