

## Local Crime & Public Safety

# She waited decades to report her abuse. At 81, police say, he confessed.

Groomed and abused as a child, she waited decades to report her farrier to Fairfax County police. When she was ready, the man she named lived only an hour away.

Today at 6:00 a.m. EST

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By Emma Uber

For 44 years, she had thought about making the call. She had waited for her parents to die. She had waited for her children to grow up. She had waited until she found other victims and researched whether it was normal for people in her position to wait.

On June 7, she warned her two daughters, who were home from college. Her son was away working a summer job. The girls encouraged her to call, but still she waited until they left for the day.

Finally, she was alone. It felt fitting to handle things the same way she'd carried her secret for years.

Seated on the secluded deck of her Fairfax County, Virginia, home with a coffee in hand, she dialed the number for Fairfax County police.

There was nothing special about this Friday in June. It was just time, she thought. The idea, a whisper in the back of her mind for decades, had crescendoed in recent years when a childhood friend who was dying revealed that she, too, shared this secret.

She had long doubted her story would be enough.

A corporate lawyer, she worried she would need a "critical mass" of survivors to come forward to build a case. Besides, she said, she feared authorities might find the arc of her life disqualifying in a case without physical evidence. She hadn't encountered the addiction or depression so common among survivors. Instead, she had finished high school, gone off to college, earned multiple degrees, graduated from an elite law school, launched a successful career and raised a family with the support of her loving parents.

"Maybe they'll catch this guy, maybe they'll laugh," she remembers thinking. "But I gotta say something."

She pressed the green call button. Almost immediately, someone picked up.

**I**t was something Stephanie, 56, had accepted as a fact of life: She was assaulted, repeatedly, from ages 11 to 14 at the Great Falls barn where she mucked out stalls and fed horses. The Washington Post does not identify victims of alleged sexual abuse without their consent. With her permission, The Post is identifying her by her first name.

It didn't affect her, Stephanie insisted, because she simply didn't allow herself to talk — or even think — about it. Isolated in her experience, she shoved it down, assuming nothing could be done. She wouldn't learn until later that Virginia is one of seven states that does not have a statute of limitations for certain sex crimes against children.

Her views on the stalking ghost of her childhood had been forged in an era when less was known about sexual assault. As the decades passed, the way the world thought about Stephanie's experience evolved.

Successive studies showed victims often delay reporting into adulthood, advocates fought to open pathways for survivors to seek justice years later and terms like "grooming" became commonplace in the conversation around child sexual abuse.

She watched documentaries about it, learning little by little, as an adult.

Then, after more than 40 years of friendship, a friend dying of lung cancer asked Stephanie a question she had never heard: "Did you ever have problems with the farrier?"

The farrier. A traveling specialist in equine foot care, he would come to clean and shoe horses' hooves at farms dotting what was then a more rural swath of Northern Virginia.

Burned in her memory as a charismatic, well-built man in his late 30s, he would visit the barn about once a month, often sporting a T-shirt that read, "Have you hugged your farrier today?"

Stephanie says she remembers freezing, looking at her friend, then replying, "You too?"

As the women began to trade stories of being groomed and abused, Stephanie says she felt relief, then horror. At last, she knew she wasn't alone, she wasn't complicit, she hadn't done anything to make herself a target. Then she thought about how the farrier had traveled from barn to barn, potentially giving him access to what Stephanie estimates to be hundreds of young riders.

After her friend died, six years ago, she began to reconnect with old barn friends. By June 7, she said, she had learned of three other women who recalled being sexually abused.

One agreed to speak with The Post and said she reported her experiences to police in connection with Stephanie's case. Through Stephanie, the other two women declined to be interviewed.

**A**s the young Fairfax County officer finished taking her statement, handed her his card and left, Stephanie thought to herself, “Well, that’s going to go nowhere.”

She was shocked when, a few weeks later, a detective called her to say Virginia does not have a statute of limitations for felony sex crimes and pledged to investigate her claims.

“I had no expectation anything would come of this,” Stephanie said, explaining that she decided to speak up because “I wanted other people to realize that you can come forward” and that “the act of coming forward is cathartic.”

Inside the police headquarters, Stephanie confided in Amanda Kelly of Fairfax County Police Department’s Major Crimes Bureau details of moments she’d only ever mentioned in passing to fellow survivors or discussed in vague terms when teaching her children the danger of child predators.

She told her she had been repeatedly assaulted starting in 1980 and described being made to feel she mattered, picked to hold the horses still while he shoed them and being called his “special girl.”

She also gave the detective a name: Edward Shelton.

In September, Kelly found him — 81 and living at the home he’d shared with his wife in Fredericksburg for the past 52 years. He’d retired from working as a farrier only six years earlier, court records say. He was battling lung cancer for a second time, his attorney said in an interview.

He agreed to an interview, during which Kelly showed him pictures of a young Stephanie. He remembered her and confessed to Kelly that he had sexually assaulted the young teen, in a recorded interview viewed by The Post. The details appeared to corroborate Stephanie’s account, Kelly noted.

“I knew better, I shouldn’t have,” Shelton said in the taped exchange.

He insisted Stephanie had been on the cusp of adulthood when he assaulted her. But detectives verified that Stephanie had transferred to a different barn, away from Shelton, by the time she was 15.

Phone calls to Shelton’s wife were not returned, and his attorney, John Clark, said she did not want to comment.

On Sept. 18, Kelly obtained a warrant for Shelton in connection with two incidents involving Stephanie. He faced two felony counts of indecent liberties with a child younger than 14 — a charge Kelly described as an outdated sort of “catchall” for such crimes that he would have faced in 1980. The next day, Shelton turned himself in.

“At no point in my mind did I think it was impossible,” Kelly said in an interview, of investigating Stephanie’s memories of abuse dating back more than 40 years. She added that she hoped Stephanie’s case would encourage other women to come forward. “I was up for it. I wanted to give her some justice after how long it’s been.”

Clark said he had not seen the interview but noted his client was in failing health at the time, questioning whether Shelton’s statements to police reflected the truth. Authorities charged Shelton only in Stephanie’s case.

Stephanie was stunned by the arrest. She said when she saw Shelton's mug shot — the first time she'd seen his face since she was a teen — she broke down. She wasn't angry at him anymore, she said, but she wants his arrest to send a message to other survivors: It's not too late.

**A** lot has changed about the way the world treats survivors of sexual abuse since 1980, experts say — including the law.

As successive scientific studies have affirmed that victims often delay reporting well into middle age, lawmakers have sought to widen the path for victims to pursue justice in court — a thorny effort in cases that often lack physical evidence. Since 2002, more than 30 states have extended the time frame survivors have to pursue legal action in a sea change that experts credit to vocal victims rights movements galvanized by the Boston Globe's investigation into child sexual abuse in the Catholic Church.

Victims rights advocates have secured policy wins on state and federal levels since, including legislation signed into law by President Joe Biden in 2022 that eliminates the federal statute of limitations for people who were sexually abused as minors to file lawsuits. Virginia is one of seven states to have eliminated the statute of limitations for criminal charges involving felony sex crimes, according to the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network, the nation's largest anti-sexual-violence organization. In 2020, state lawmakers expanded the statute of limitations for misdemeanor sex crimes against minors.

These legal changes are rooted in science, sexual violence prevention researcher Elizabeth Jeglic said.

In recent decades, studies have revealed children are often assaulted by adults close to them, improving society's understanding of grooming and transforming the way adults should speak to children about sexual abuse, Jeglic says. While children have long been warned about "stranger danger," past generations of youth were not equipped to recognize or report abuse at the hands of adults they knew and trusted. As a result, Jeglic says, only about a third of survivors report child sexual abuse before adulthood.

"The science shows us that most survivors don't report in a timely way. They wait years, even decades, and some of them don't report at all," said Jeglic, a professor of psychology at John Jay College of Criminal Justice.

Stephanie said her reasons for waiting changed over time. At 11, she was confused, but flattered, by the attention of the handsome farrier. By 14, she said she understood what had happened to her was wrong and was mortified by the idea of her friends finding out. In early adulthood, she buried the idea of reporting and focused on building a career and a family. In her 40s and 50s, she said, she fixated over how her confession would impact the lives of those she loved most: Would her children get bullied? Would her aging parents blame themselves?

"I didn't want to burden them with that," Stephanie said of her parents. "I know now, as a mother, if something like that happened to my kid, my immediate response would be, 'What did I do wrong? How did I fail my child that way?'"

These thoughts are common among survivors of sexual abuse, Jeglic said, even as society's understanding of how predators psychologically manipulate children has improved exponentially in recent decades. People now understand that perpetrators will seek to isolate children, earn their trust and make them feel special as they work to desensitize them to sexual content or physical touch, she said, blurring boundaries and creating confusion for victims.

As a parent, Stephanie began the conversation about child sexual abuse with her children at a young age and included more of her personal story as they grew older and more mature. She wanted them to know there was nothing they couldn't tell her, she said. She worked to ensure they had the information she desperately wished she had at 11.

**A**s Stephanie's shock over Shelton's arrest faded, dread set in. She said she agonized over coming face-to-face with him in court; she researched his family and took solace in the fact he never had children; she stared at his mug shot and felt conflicted about potentially sending a frail 81-year-old man to prison. Then, she said, she felt angry at herself for feeling conflicted — she'd endured enough misplaced guilt over the years, after all, and he deserved to be held accountable.

As she wrestled with these thoughts, she made a plan. She had choices now that she did not have as a child, and she would decide what to do with them. When the time came, she said she would ask Shelton to admit to her, before a judge, that he abused her from ages 11 to 14. Then, she would ask the judge to be lenient.

She didn't get the chance. Four months after reporting him, she was again sitting on her back deck when a friend called with the news: Shelton was dead.

He spent six days in jail and was released Sept. 25 ahead of a hearing in December, court records show. Less than two weeks later, on Oct. 7, authorities say he died of medical causes. An obituary directed people to support the American Cancer Society or American Heart Association.

Stephanie said she spent the rest of the day on the deck, processing. Texts and calls went unanswered. She said she laughed at the irony of the timing, prayed, then cried for her 11-year-old self, the other victims she believes are out there and even for his family. She reminded herself her goal was never a conviction.

She decided to watch Shelton's interview tape. By the time she donned a suit and walked into Fairfax County Police Department headquarters on a December afternoon, she had resolved to forgive him.

"This was never about vengeance, this was never about retribution," she said as she steeled herself to watch the interview. "If one person sees this and says, 'They finally got the guy,' and that brings them comfort, that's enough. If somebody gets the gumption up to say, 'Hi, me too,' that's enough."

Kelly, the detective, had marked the point in the video where Shelton confessed, but Stephanie wanted to hear all roughly 100 minutes.

She watched as Shelton entered an interrogation room. She listened as he explained the side effects of his chemotherapy treatments to Kelly in a genial Southern drawl, called her pretty, and asked whether she had a husband or children.

But when Kelly pressed for how he felt about admitting to a sexual relationship with Stephanie and another teen from the barn, his tone took a turn.

He called the girls at the barn “groupies” and insisted they instigated any sexual encounters. “I think that none of that would have happened if they hadn’t been in a flirty mood,” he said.

When Kelly shut off the tape, Stephanie paused. A terse silence filled the room.

“Whatever kind of forgiveness I found in my heart, I’m going to have to rekindle,” Stephanie finally said. “Because it’s gone.”

Still, for the first time since she was 11, she no longer shoulders a secret. Since she has opened up about the abuse to friends, many have confided in her about similar experiences, she said.

Two told her they have since gone to the police.