

The many faces of Laurie Dann

Dann

Continued from page 1

problems you have been struggling with," the doctor wrote in trying to persuade her to continue therapy.

"I think it is important for you to realize, if you don't already, that the nature of your problems go back long before you married your husband, and it relates very much to your childhood upbringing."

On and off, she would continue therapy. She also would buy three guns. In the final months of her life, she would cease treatment.

The contradictions seem endless. She was adored by children, and it was children who became her final target.

"Why did she shoot six kids she didn't know?" Winnetka police Lt. Joe Sumner said. "That particular answer we may never get."

Her family, distraught over the tragedy and unwilling to talk to reporters, has not been able to shade in the portrait of their only daughter. Her ex-husband made one short appearance on national television and then disappeared from the public eye. Her psychiatrist in Madison has cooperated with police, but his insights, based on a patient-doctor relationship, have been shielded from the public; he has told police she never related to him thoughts of violence.

In taking her own life, she probably took away the one chance to put a name on the evil that grew within her. All she left behind was a fascinating, unfinished picture of torment.

Laurie Wasserman was born on Oct. 18, 1957, in Michael Reese Hospital on Chicago's South Side, the second child of Edith Joy, 27, and Norman Wasserman, 28, an accountant. The couple then lived with their 5-year-old son, Mark, in the Hill neighborhood near South Shore.

Seven years later, the Wassermans packed up for the North Shore and a large brick trilevel home with a big bay window in Highland Park.

Laurie attended West Ridge Elementary School, now closed, four blocks from her home, and Red Oak Junior High, three blocks away. The recollections of Red Oak classmates do not vary much: She was quiet and unremarkable—except perhaps in her spelling ability. Nobody recalls that she had any close friends.

"She was very, very quiet," a classmate said, "and she was very strange because you'd walk down the hall and say 'Hi' and she wouldn't say anything. I remember her always getting good grades. It didn't seem she had many friends in junior high."

In a 6th-grade class portrait, she kneels at the end of the front row, head turned toward the boy next to her, the only child not facing the camera.

The 8th-grade yearbook, the Red Oak Leaves, includes for each graduate a "prophecy" and a "last will and testament" to a 7th grader, written by Bernie Hirsch and another classmate. Her "last will" read: "Laurie Wasserman's spelling quota to lucky Jeff Worth."

Hirsch said the prophecy written for her was unusually short, "Laurie Wasserman grows," and referred to the fact she had yet to mature.

"It's really weird because everyone else gets, like, 20 words," said Hirsch, now a commercial music producer in Indianapolis. "She gets one."

Wasserman attended Highland Park High School for her freshman and sophomore years, then transferred to New Trier East High School, Winnetka, in 1973 after her family moved to a \$100,000 home in Glencoe. Her parents still live in the sprawling five-bedroom house. Though comfortable by any measure, the home is modest by Sheridan Road and Glencoe standards.

Norman Wasserman loves to travel, loves his tennis and jogging and has built a successful accounting business. But his priority, by most accounts, has been taking care of his family.

Though Wasserman showered his daughter with gifts, the family seemed to lack outward, emotional displays of affection. In a speech at a prenuptial dinner years later, Laurie would find herself unable to tell her parents she loved them—even though the words were in her prepared text.

At New Trier, Laurie did not seem to have many girlfriends—a trait that would follow her throughout her life—but was popular with boys. She attended the junior prom at the Orrington Hotel in Evanston.

"She was standing in the hall," her prom date said. "I had seen her before around school, but she was never with anyone. She was real cute and had a great figure, so one day I walked up and started to talk with her."

They dated for about a month. "I had a LeMans convertible, and we would drive around after school, listening to Beach Boys tapes," the former boyfriend said. "We would go over to her house and listen to the radio. I can't remember that she had any friends of her own."

Bonds with the girls at New Trier were not easily forged by

Laurie, and she was denied access to some of the more coveted positions in the high school hierarchy. She tried out for cheerleading and the Girls Club, one classmate said, but did not make the cut. Each time, she walked away angry.

"I perceived a paranoia when girls were around," a female classmate recalled. "She always had a boyfriend and was really clingy, draped around him. That really struck me, that she was somehow frightened and had a real unhealthy attachment to boys."

A classmate, Scott Walker, remembers that she cheated off him in U.S. history—and also turned him down when he asked for a date. Her prom date said that when she worked as a cashier at a local K mart, she would give him discounts or not charge him at all.

In the fall of 1976, she entered Drake University in Des Moines as an education major. A year later she transferred to the University of Arizona in Tucson as a liberal arts major. She pledged the Alpha Delta Pi sorority.

She was a C student. Her main interest on campus, said one former sorority sister, was not difficult to distinguish: "Men! She had a lot of dates."

Frequently she would make dates with several men for one evening, her sorority sisters said, and then cancel all but one—"the one guy she really wanted to go out with"—at the last minute.

Among her Alpha Delta Pi sisters, she was not particularly social. "She complained a lot and rarely was fun to be with," a former roommate said.

That summer, Laurie Wasserman took a home economics course at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, and when she returned to Tucson in the fall of 1977 she changed her major to home economics. She also found time, she would later confide, to learn marksmanship in off-campus instruction.

For two years, her steady boyfriend was a pre-med student, but they broke up as he was about to enter medical school.

The breakup did not seem especially traumatic or significant, said Lou Spivack, a prosecutor in Tucson who also attended the university and double-dated with the pre-med student and Wasserman.

The ex-boyfriend, according to Spivack, remembers that "she tended to be possessive of him and jealous of other women." But, he says: "Laurie never was a budding psychopath here in Arizona. If she was, we never saw it."

Not long after the split, in the summer of 1980, she left the university.

Laurie Wasserman returned to the North Shore. A new romance began.

She met Russell Dann at a bar, and they started dating. Russell, who grew up in Highland Park, was a rising employee of Dann Brothers Insurance Co. in Northbrook, the family business. He



'Laurie never was a budding psychopath here in Arizona. If she was, we never saw it.'

thought she was quiet but cute. Just the right height, too. At 5-foot-3, she was a couple inches shorter.

But in many ways he was Laurie's opposite. "You could characterize Russell as an all-American boy," said his uncle, Charles Dann. "Very outgoing, a great number of friends, well-liked."

He is a champion tennis player at the Green Acres Country Club in Northbrook, Charles Dann said, and "an outstanding skier." His passion for tennis seemed to parallel that of Laurie's youthful-looking father, Norman Wasserman.

All of Russell's friends, it seemed, were getting married. Laurie and Russell were engaged nine months later at the Wassermans' Florida home in Boca Raton.

They were married on Sept. 11, 1982, in Northbrook. It was decided to have a small ceremony, partly because Russell's friends would far outnumber Laurie's.

The Wassermans' wedding present was \$15,000. He was 26. She was one month shy of 25.

By this time, she had enrolled in and withdrawn from six courses at Northwestern University's continuing education program. Applying for jobs, she lied that she had received a degree from Arizona and had worked at Dann Brothers. The work she found was uninteresting; she quit as a receptionist at Northwestern in August, 1982, complaining that she was not being challenged.

Once married, she did not need to work. Russell Dann was earning a six-figure salary that was only a fraction of his net worth.

While courting and as newlyweds, Russell Dann began to notice what, at first, he thought to be harmless superstitions. At sto-



The Towers in Madison, where Laurie Dann lived this year. Dann told students there she was a sophomore studying journalism and became known as a loner and the "psycho elevator lady."

plights, Laurie would open the door and tap her foot on the pavement. She would tiptoe around a carpet at her parents' Boca Raton home. She would refuse to close cabinets in the kitchen.

Soon he realized the problems might be deeper. Laurie's father, who also was part-owner of a clothing store, provided her with new clothes, but they ended up in messy piles on the closet floor. Her car, family members thought, looked like the home of a bag lady.

"He worked a full day," said a friend of Laurie and Russell Dann's. "She had barely woken up by the time he got home. She was dependent and helpless. She couldn't hold a job. He tried very hard to make it work."

Laurie would later say that she felt a competition with his mother, an attractive woman who was also a successful commodities trader.

Faced with the problems of a new marriage and deep-rooted troubles just beginning to surface, Laurie Dann began to see a psychiatrist. Her husband promised to spend whatever it took to make her well, but by March, 1984, she was refusing help.

A letter from her psychiatrist on March 12 pleaded with her to continue psychotherapy. The letter also warned Laurie that she could not rely on medication to cure her problems.

"The use of medication can only result in a symptomatic improvement and not in a definitive cure for the kinds of difficulties that you are experiencing," the doctor wrote. "Medication can also only be appropriately administered under ongoing doctor's observation and care."

In 1985, they bought a five-bedroom house in Highland Park. Later that year, they separated.

Russell Dann's father, Armand, gave Norman Wasserman a deadline to come to a friendly divorce agreement. The day before the deadline, in January, 1986, Laurie Dann filed for dissolution of the marriage. She told her lawyer that she was hoping to drag out the divorce proceedings for two to three years.

The marriage was the only thing she had and the only thing she wanted, a friend of the couple's said. According to the friend, Laurie told Russell, "If I can't have you, nobody can."

A lawyer familiar with the case described Laurie as "emotionally dominated" by her husband.

At a hearing in June, 1986, on temporary support for Laurie, her lawyer alleged that Dann had beaten his wife during the marriage and the separation. It was not the only time Laurie Dann accused her husband of violence—and, like the other times, there was never much evidence to give credibility to her charge.

In Tucson, Laurie's ex-boyfriend from college, now a doctor, had begun receiving harassing phone calls.

On May 10, 1986, Laurie Dann walked into the Marksmen gunshop in Glenview, where the clerk remembers her as being flirtatious. She bought a .357 Smith & Wesson Magnum.

She told her parents she needed it for protection. A friend of the Dann family made sure Russell knew his estranged wife now was armed. And Russell told police. When Mr. and Mrs. Wasserman were contacted by Glencoe police, they said they would put the gun

in a safe-deposit box.

In August, Laurie met John Childs, now 34, on the Glencoe beach, and they struck up a short friendship. He lived only two houses away.

His relationship with Dann lasted only into September, recalls his mother, Alexandra. He decided to stop seeing her after noticing certain idiosyncracies: Laurie would open doors and pick up silverware with her sleeves. She did not like to be touched. She was scared of her husband.

Mrs. Childs remembers that Laurie washed her hands frequently, a habit she noticed when Laurie would come over to the house and wait for John to return from work. "I sure pick winners," John told his mother sarcastically.

The next bizarre incident in the Dann marriage took place on Sept. 30, 1986. As he slept in his apartment, Russell Dann was stabbed in the chest with an ice pick.

A hardware store employee said he remembered Laurie Dann buying an ice pick. A receipt for an ice pick was found in Laurie's home. Russell Dann failed a lie-detector test. His ex-wife, he said, passed one. No charges were pressed.

"She actually told me she did it," Russell Dann told ABC-TV's "Nightline" program on May 23. "I was talking to her on my car phone, and I said to her, I said: 'Laurie, I mean, you know it's one thing to hate me for the divorce, whatever. I mean, when you go to this extent, I mean, you need help.'"

It was after the stabbing that Dann, his friends and his family began receiving late-night harassing phone calls they thought were from Laurie. At first, the caller would simply ring once and hang up.

A Deerfield woman dating Russell Dann reported similar calls to local police in October and said she suspected Laurie Dann. The calls were traced to the Wasserman address in Glencoe.

"Victim believes suspect is 10-96," the police report said. The number is a police code for "mental patient."

She was arrested by Highland Park police in November, 1986, for making harassing calls. Charges later were dropped by Lake County prosecutors, who cited a lack of concrete evidence.

The divorce seemed to be proceeding smoothly as of Jan. 28, 1987.

Court documents show the couple intended to split the money from selling the house, valued at about \$250,000, and Russell Dann would pay Laurie \$1,250 a month for 36 months.

At about the same time, the harassing phone calls seemed to diminish. But by March, Russell Dann's friends were again "experiencing the same terror," as one of them put it, and wrote the Lake County state's attorney seeking help.

"This was happening two or three times a night, five days in a row," said a friend who received calls.

The divorce was granted on April 27. One of her lawyers remembers that she once recoiled in horror when he tried to shake her hand.

Not long after that, in May, she accused her ex-husband of sexually assaulting her. After hair samples were taken from Russell Dann, prosecutors decided not to pursue the case.

That same month, Laurie told police that a Molotov cocktail had been left on the kitchen table in Glencoe. Russell Dann was questioned, but no charges were filed.

A caller to the home of Susan Taylor, Russell Dann's sister, threatened: "Susie, Susie, Susie, you are going to die. Goodbye." The caller would say, "I'm a psychopath," and she would laugh.

That summer Laurie Dann sublet an apartment from a student at the Kellogg Living Learning Center at Northwestern in Evanston.

A student working at the center later told university public-safety officials that Dann was curious about which fraternities would be preferable for meeting men.

She soon became a suspect in thefts at the building and for several disruptive incidents, including meat left under the cushions of chairs and couches in the lounges.

It was around this time that Laurie Dann, who always wanted to have one child, decided to take up baby-sitting. She posted handwritten notices on bulletin boards in the Glencoe Public Library and Dee Jay's Foods in Glencoe.

Laurie Dann was either a near-perfect baby-sitter or a disaster, depending on which North Shore family is talking. But all the families that hired her in 1987, even those who thought her a thief, vandalizer, liar and worse, said she was good with children.

One couple who came to believe that she stole food and defaced property recalls her readily playing games and putting together puzzles with their children.

"She had an almost childlike quality about her," the father said. "But she had a great uneasiness with adults."

Norman Wasserman steadfastly denied that his daughter stole the food, but he did agree to pay the other father \$400 for the missing items. "He said there's no way you can prove it," the man said.

Laurie Dann was not missed. "She had body odor like a long-shoreman," the mother said. And, she said, Laurie would use pots and silverware and then put them back in cabinets and drawers without washing them.

Kenneth Beckman, whose son said he saw Laurie stealing frozen steaks and other food, was not interested in restitution. But the Glencoe man was so concerned about Laurie Dann that he considered taking out a newspaper ad to warn the North Shore about her; he was dissuaded from this by police.

Elsewhere on the North Shore, in Winnetka, the Bayless family was extremely happy with Dann after she was recommended by the family next door, Padraig and Marian Rushe. "Our daughter loved her," said Craig Bayless, of Winnetka. "She was great with kids."

The university, meanwhile, had moved to evict her, but her father arrived to conciliate, and she moved out Sept. 7.

Her existence in Evanston was largely nocturnal, said an investigator Russell Dann had hired after



'She had an almost childlike quality about her, but she had a great uneasiness with adults.'

he grew afraid of her. He said that when school officials inspected her apartment, they found urine-stained floors and rancid meat on the counter.

Laurie was discovered five blocks away, sleeping in her car, which the investigator found was not unusual.

In October, after four complaints about theft of food and clothing, Robert Bonneville, Glencoe's public-safety director, reached an agreement with Norman Wasserman. He said his daughter would not seek any more baby-sitting jobs but would continue with the families who liked her. Wasserman already had paid restitution to two families.

Last Nov. 7, Laurie Dann returned to the Marksmen and bought a .32 caliber Smith & Wesson, the gun she later would use to take her own life. She also purchased a .22 caliber semiautomatic Beretta on Dec. 29.

Police believe she moved to Madison sometime in November.

The phone-call harassment had gotten so bad by last January that four men from four affected families met with Glencoe's Bonneville and suggested formation of a task force of North Shore police to investigate allegations against Laurie Dann.

A Glencoe detective, Floyd Mohr, was assigned to the case, and he learned that Laurie Dann was seeing a psychiatrist. The detective later told some of the people receiving phone calls that the psychiatrist believed she would not harm herself or anyone else.

After a lull in Tucson, Dann's ex-boyfriend had begun receiving harassing calls again.

It was in January that Dann moved to the Towers, off-campus

student housing, in Madison. She was seeing a university psychiatrist, Dr. John Greist. And he prescribed a drug called lithium carbonate, commonly used to treat manic depression.

She also started taking an experimental drug called clomipramine. The drug controls obsessive-compulsive disorders, which are marked by ritualistic or repetitive behavior.

She stopped her visits to Greist in March.

At the Towers, Dann told students she was a sophomore studying journalism and said she had transferred from Northwestern. She quickly became known as a loner and an eccentric and was nicknamed the "psycho elevator lady."

She seemed to be gaining weight, but some students thought she was bulimic. A 5th-floor student said she saw a note at the front desk of the dining room saying, "Please don't let Laurie Dann leave and come back for meals." Dann favored sweatsuits, and her hair was greasy.

Her suite mate said she once found a note in Dann's room that appeared to be a schedule for riding the elevators.

Spooked by Dann's elevator habits, her eating habits and rumors that she had been seen shoplifting by other students, the suite mate grew fearful and moved out. Nobody moved in next to Dann.

Early in the spring the Glencoe family that had hired Laurie and had accused her of stealing food received a death threat from a woman caller: "Your children are going to die."

On March 10, the wife of one of Dann's friends received a death threat over the phone.

On March 12, Dann was reportedly seen in a lab at the University of Wisconsin Hospital and Clinics Building. Three days later, a quantity of arsenic and lead was reported stolen.

On March 14, Laurie Dann was arrested and charged with shoplifting four wigs and two hairclips at a J.C. Penney store in Madison. She said she was a University of Arizona student, gave her address as the Highland Park home she had once shared with her husband and listed her weight at 130 pounds, 33 pounds heavier than what was on her driver's license.

Shortly before Mother's Day, Susan Taylor picked up the phone and heard a female voice: "Susie, Mother's Day, are you all getting together? You shall die."

A call May 9 to the Tucson ex-boyfriend threatened that he and his children would be stabbed. "It sounded like the voice of the Wicked Witch of the West," prosecutor Spivack quoted the doctor as saying.

Arizona prosecutors had planned to indict Dann May 18 for the stabbing threat. That idea, however, was dropped in favor of bringing multiple charges in Madison in hopes of having her held without bail over death threats against the Tucson ex-boyfriend, Russell Dann and Taylor.

On May 15, with most students already gone for the summer, a staff member at the Towers found her in a 5th-floor garbage room. She was lying in a corner of the room, curled up in a fetal position with a plastic bag pulled over her body, dripping with sweat.

Police believe she left Madison at 4 a.m. May 16.

On May 20, Laurie Dann set out from her Glencoe home in a luxury Toyota with the three guns from the Marksmen and packages of food tainted with lead and arsenic.

She delivered the food to two Northwestern fraternities, baby-sitting clients and people she knew only tenuously. Her psychiatrist and her ex-husband received packages of tainted juice in the mail.

She went to the home of the Rushes, who earlier that week had told her they were moving away, and said she was taking two of the family's children on an outing.

With the two children in tow, she drove to Ravinia Elementary School in Highland Park and started a small fire. At the day center at the Young Men's Jewish Council, also in Highland Park, she was prevented from entering but apparently left a Mickey Mouse cup laced with poison. The children of Susan Taylor were at the two Highland Park schools.

She then returned to the Rushe home and took the children to the basement. When the mother went to check on them, Laurie Dann set the basement stairway afire and fled. The mother and children fled through a basement window.

At Hubbard Woods School in Winnetka, where the Rushe children were enrolled, she shot and killed 8-year-old Nicholas Corwin and wounded five other children.

In a nearby Winnetka home, she would fire two more bullets. Philip Andrew, a 20-year-old University of Illinois student, was wounded by the first.

She used the second to kill herself, placing the .32 inside her mouth and pulling the trigger.

At her death, Laurie Wasserman Dann weighed 137 pounds. She wore a University of Arizona medical school T-shirt imprinted with a skeleton posed as the Thinker.

Ray Gibson, William Recktenwald, John O'Brien, Steve Johnson, Barbara Mahany and Stevenson Swanson contributed to this report.