

CASE STUDY

GERTRUDE BANISZEWSKI

When the police arrived at the home of Gertrude Baniszewski in October 1965, they found the lifeless body of 16-year-old Sylvia Likens. Sylvia's parents had found employment as carnival workers. This required them to move around, so Gertrude Baniszewski agreed to board Sylvia and her sister Jenny for \$20 a week. When one of the checks arrived late, Baniszewski lashed out at the two girls. This was followed by three weeks of violent and sadistic attacks, especially on Sylvia. A number of Baniszewski's seven children, along with some neighborhood children, watched or actually joined in the torture. This was all done under the supervision of Baniszewski. No one reported the abuse.¹

Sylvia's emaciated corpse was covered with over 150 wounds ranging from burns to cuts. Sylvia was burned with cigarettes numerous times; she was forced to dance naked in front of the other children; she took baths in scalding water; and she was constantly beaten and starved. On one horrible night, Baniszewski took a sewing needle and carved an "I" in Sylvia's abdomen. She then gave the needle to a neighbor boy and instructed him to spell the word "prostitute."

After this incident, Sylvia was dead and Baniszewski was arrested along with eight youthful offenders ranging in age from 11 to 17 years. The children stated that they participated in the torture of Sylvia because "Gertie" told them to. In 1966, Gertrude Baniszewski was convicted of first-degree murder; her daughter, Paula, was convicted of second-degree murder; and, the remaining offenders were found guilty of lesser homicide charges.²



A 1965 photograph of Sylvia Likens.

**DO WE AS
A SOCIETY
PERCEIVE
SUCH OFFENSES
COMMITTED BY A
MOTHER DIFFERENTLY
THAN SIMILAR
OFFENSES
COMMITTED BY A
FATHER?**

THINK ABOUT IT:

1. Do we as a society perceive such offenses committed by a mother differently than similar offenses committed by a father?
2. Do we initially ask, "How could a mother do that to another child?"