**New Life Is Redemption for Caril Ann Fugate, Who Still Claims Innocence in Killings**

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[Caril Ann Fugate](http://www.tumblr.com/tagged/caril-ann-fugate%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) was just 14 when she was arrested for committing 10 murders with her boyfriend in an interstate spree more than a half century ago that inspired three movies and a [Bruce Springsteen](http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2012/02/12/springsteen-eastwood-point-toward-a-gutsy-american-comeback.html) song.

She might still be in a Nebraska prison had her life sentence not been commuted the same year Sissy Spacek portrayed her sympathetically in the film *Badlands*.

Now, 54 years after her 1958 arrest and 36 years after her 1976 release on parole, she is instead proof that the [Supreme Court](http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2012/06/09/why-is-the-supreme-court-so-unpopular.html) was not necessarily placing us all at risk when it [ruled that mandatory life sentences without parole for juveniles are unconstitutional](http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2012/06/26/families-decry-supreme-court-decision-on-juvenile-life-without-parole.html).

For 30 years after her release, Caril Ann worked as a janitor at a Michigan hospital. She had begun training as a nurse’s aide in prison, but on the outside, her record prevented her from being entrusted with anything more than custodial work. A stepson says, “She told me every day she hated going to work.”

But she made herself as useful as she could.

“She’d clean up a couple beds, clean up the floors,” the stepson says. “Help out.”

And she kept at it without incident until 2007, when she married a small-town machinist who also serves as an observer for the National Weather Service. She, who had been with a psychopathic killer when she was impossibly young, entered her senior years with a steady soul who makes daily measurements of precipitation and the level of the river that runs near the house.

She had kept a surname that remained infamous through the years, but with her marriage at age 63 she took her husband’s surname, which The Daily Beast is withholding along with her exact location, lest her quiet, anonymous life be upended.



The teen killers before their Nebraska killing spree, 1958

Back when the name Fugate gained such notoriety, Caril Ann was brought before the press as the youngest female in America ever charged with first-degree murder. She said she had begun seeing 19-year-old Charles Starkweather the year before, when she was 13, but had recently tried to break it off.

“I told him I didn’t want to see him again but he came back,” she said. “I kept telling him to leave. I told him to leave and I didn’t ever want to see him again.”

“What had bought you to this conclusion?” she was asked. “Why didn’t you want to go with him anymore?”

“I think he’s crazy,” she said.

She had insisted from the moment of her arrest that Starkweather had held her hostage and that she had not been aware he had killed her mother, stepfather, and 2-year-old half-sister at the start of the spree. She was asked at the press conference why her boyfriend insisted she had been a willing participant.

“Well, by now, I’m sure he hates me for running away,” Caril Ann said. “He’s trying to make it look like I’m just as guilty as he is.”

Starkweather’s testimony against her at trial ensured she was officially found exactly as guilty as he was. But he was sentenced to death, whereas she was spared because of her age, and perhaps her gender.

“If they were going to give me life, why didn’t they give me the chair?” she exclaimed at her sentencing, breaking into tears.

She is proof the Supreme Court was not placing us all at risk when it ruled that mandatory life sentences without parole for juveniles are unconstitutional.

Starkweather insisted to the very hour of his execution that Caril Ann had been complicit, perhaps out of urges that [Springsteen](http://www.thedailybeast.com/videos/2012/04/05/bruce-sprinsteen-the-boss-dances-with-mom.html) would guess at decades later with his song “Nebraska.”

“*Sheriff, when the man pulls that switch … You make sure my pretty baby is sitting right there on my lap.”*

Caril Ann was sent to the Nebraska women’s prison. She later said in a documentary film that the reality of her situation struck her as she was processed.

“They fingerprint you and they take what they call—prison term—a mug shot,” she recalled. “I thought, ‘This is it, you’re not leaving. You’re going to stay here … You are forever and ever and ever doomed.’”

She added, “I cried a lot that day.”

She was a model prisoner when she came before the parole board, which was no doubt further influenced by the sympathetic treatment of her in [Terrence Malick](http://www.thedailybeast.com/videos/2012/01/23/plummer-i-ll-never-work-with-him-again.html)’s *Badlands*. She would tell her stepson that this was the most accurate of the movies inspired by the spree, even though she insists that in real life there had been no sex.

“She said that was really the closest to the truth,” the stepson told The Daily Beast.

Besides the post-arrest press appearance and the documentary, Caril Ann’s only other public comments were on a Nebraska radio show in 1996, shortly after the state denied her a pardon.

“Since this has happened, there’s not a day in my life that has gone by that I haven’t thought about it,” she said of the killings. “There’s times when I think about my family and when I think about them, it’s always what happened. It’s always how they died.”

The first caller to the radio show was a woman who said she had known Caril Ann as a youngster and had seen Starkweather abuse her. The woman said she was sure Caril Ann was indeed innocent.

“I’ve believed you forever,” the woman said.

Caril Ann was weeping as she replied, “You have to realize this is the first time anybody has ever come forward on my behalf.”

A second caller said she herself had been the victim of an abusive boyfriend and doubted that the all-male Board of Pardons could understand how difficult it is to escape such a situation.

“I just can’t help thinking that if there were women on the pardons board that you would have been pardoned,” this caller said.

Since then, Caril Ann has made no public comment, and she declined to speak with The Daily Beast. Her marriage has previously been reported, but there have been no particulars about her husband, and she has been incorrectly said to have settled with him in Lansing, Mich. Her stepson says she recently suffered several strokes and is partially paralyzed. He also reports that as she approaches her 69thbirthday, she continues to insist upon her innocence.

Meanwhile, whenever it rains nor snows, the woman who started out with the abusive and homicidal Starkweather is now with a weather-observer husband who carefully notes exactly how much has fallen, just as he has done for 47 years.

A big event in her present life is an inch of rain in a summer month.