

The Times-Picayune

100TH YEAR NO. 218

Anne Garcia Comardelle, 30, suffered years of sexual abuse at the hands of her stepfather, had his child at age 12 and endured years of knowing that those she depended on most did nothing to help her. Though *The Times-Picayune* does not usually publish the names of sex abuse victims, Comardelle has asked that hers be used in telling her story.

A SECRET IN THE FAMILY

By **REBECCA THEIM**
Staff writer

When her mother left the family's Marrero home for work every evening, 8-year-old Anne Garcia Comardelle said she knew what was expected of her by her stepfather, Rene "Tony" Rolland.

"As soon as my mama left to go to work I got up and went to bed with him — it was automatic," Comardelle, now 30, said. "I thought this was what life was supposed to be. That's

what he told me: Fathers break their daughters in."

Twenty-two years after the sexual assaults by her stepfather began and 17 years after Comardelle gave birth at age 12 to Rolland's child, she sat in a Jefferson Parish courtroom last week and listened as her stepfather, now 57, pleaded guilty to charges stemming from the incestuous relationship. He was sentenced to 40 years in prison.

Comardelle said she remained in the courtroom after Rolland was sen-

tenced just to see him led away in handcuffs.

Her stepfather's sentence marked the end of an horrific chapter in Comardelle's life, a period dominated by a taboo relationship that relatives, friends and neighbors knew about.

"I knew who it was" after reading about the sentencing, said a former neighbor of the Rollands whose daughter was a close childhood friend of Comardelle's. "My kids knew."

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Secret

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Although Comardelle said a cast of physicians, teachers, friends and relatives either suspected or knew of the abuse, nobody stepped forward to stop it.

"Nobody did anything. She thought nobody would help her, nobody would care," said Anne Garcia, Comardelle's sister-in-law and confidante. They have been friends since shortly after Comardelle gave birth to Rolland's child, a daughter, now 17.

"People ask why I waited so long" to publicly disclose the abuse, Comardelle said. "Do you know how long I blamed this on myself? But I'm not guilty and that's why I want every detail to be public. My name's been slandered all my life. Going public is what's going to clear my name."

Comardelle's ordeal began shortly after her mother, Camille Garcia Rolland, and Rolland began dating in the early 1970s. Both had been married previously and each had four children.

Comardelle and her three brothers initially adored Rolland, who held a variety of jobs over the course of his 25-year marriage to Mrs. Rolland, Comardelle said.

"He cooked for us, he took us out to eat — anything we wanted, we got," Comardelle said.

But the adoration disappeared quickly when Rolland began his sexual assaults, she said.

"He brought books home to me, 'Everything You Always Wanted To Know About Sex,' and things like that," she said. "He would come and pick me up out of my bed to go and sleep in bed with him. He would kiss and fondle me."

Comardelle said she disclosed the abuse to her mother.

"I was 8 years old when it first began and I went to my mother and told her something was going on and she told me, 'Wake up Anne, you're living in a fairy tale world. This is what you want to happen,'" Comardelle recalled.

Mrs. Rolland said Thursday that she was unavailable for an interview Thursday or Friday and was undecided about whether she would agree to be interviewed at all. She did not respond to additional requests made Friday to schedule an interview.

Rolland's mother, Mary Rolland, defended her son. She said that, as a child, Comardelle "threw herself at him."

"He's taking care of the child, he adopted her," Mary Rolland said of Comardelle's daughter. "I don't know what more Anne wants. I don't know why she's doing all of this."

Other family members said many people either knew about or had suspicions about the abuse, particularly after Comardelle gave birth to the child.

"We all suspected that," said Ann Gooden, Camille Rolland's sister. "We knew something was going on. We sort of hoped something would be done."

Rolland began having sexual intercourse with Comardelle shortly after Christmas 1975, Comardelle said. She remembers the time because she had just gotten a new bicycle for Christmas. She was 11.

"When he penetrated me, I was bleeding and he made me call my mama at the hospital (where she worked) and tell her I had fell on the bar of my bike," Comardelle said.

Few, if anyone outside of Comardelle's immediate family suspected she was pregnant. She had a kidney condition when she was a child that frequently left her bloated and bed-ridden, so it was easy for her and her family to attribute the weight gain to the kidney condition, she said.

"Nobody knew that I was pregnant, except for me, Mama, Tony and my brothers. I was always sick when I was pregnant. All of a sudden the story was that my mama adopted a baby; my mama brought a baby home."

The Gretna obstetrician and gynecologist who delivered Comardelle's baby recalled that Camille

Rolland had approached him and arranged for him to care for Comardelle through her pregnancy. The two worked together at a local hospital, where Camille Rolland, 58, still is night nursing supervisor. The doctor, who agreed to be interviewed on the condition his identity not be revealed, said Camille Rolland told him her daughter had been raped a few months earlier while the family lived in London where Rolland worked temporarily.



Rolland

story, so when the Jefferson Parish authorities contacted me (in 1993 about Rolland's criminal prosecution) and told me they suspected the stepfather, it didn't surprise me," the doctor said. "It just seemed fishy."

Still, the doctor said he did not talk to Camille Rolland about his suspicions. He said he did not initially suspect that the child was Rolland's.

"I did not confront them," the doctor said. "We involve ourselves with the medical facts, not the personal issues."

Comardelle said it took enrollment in Catholic confirmation classes for her to realize something was terribly wrong with her relationship with Rolland.

"What made me realize it wasn't right . . . was when we started studying for our confirmation and we started learning about the Ten Commandments and adultery and stuff like that, that's when I woke up and said, 'Hey, this isn't right.'"

At that point, violence became a new aspect of the relationship, she said.

"I wasn't going to agree to this anymore. He came to my room, actually picked me up out of my bed. He handcuffed me to the

rails of the bed, stuffed a gag in my mouth because my little brother was sleeping in the other room and he had sex with me."

The abuse caused Comardelle difficulties that went beyond her family and her home.

When the mother of one of Comardelle's classmates at Our Lady of Prompt Succor in Westwego learned Comardelle, then 13, had a child, the woman lobbied to have her thrown out of the school. Camille Rolland intervened and asked to address her daughter's classmates.

"Miss Camille made arrangements to go and have an assembly with the seventh- and eighth-grade students and explain that there was a little girl who lived in England and before she left, she got raped and she had a baby," Comardelle's sister-in-law Anne Garcia said.

A longtime employee of the school confirmed that Camille Rolland addressed students about her daughter's pregnancy and school administrators believed Comardelle had been raped. Investigators who ultimately pressed charges against Rolland, however, used medical and birth records to prove Comardelle could not have been impregnated until after the family returned to the United States.

The cornerstone of the prosecution's case was DNA testing that proved within 99.997 percent certainty that Rolland had fathered his stepdaughter's child.

Shortly after the birth of Comardelle's daughter, the Rollands adopted the child and, for the most part, raised her as their own. She lives with Camille Rolland, declined to be interviewed and asked not to be identified.

Even after the child's birth, the family's denial of the true nature of the relationship continued, Comardelle and relatives said.

"We knew something had gone on," but the Rollands "made it seem like Anne was losing her mind," Anne Garcia said. "One time they sat me down, Camille and Tony, and they said, 'Do you know why Anne has done all these things? She's in love with Tony.' I didn't say anything, I just left."

Comardelle left her mother's and stepfather's home at 15, when her daughter was 3. She lived with friends and other relatives for years before marrying. She and her husband separated in May, after a troubled 10-year marriage.

She credits her brother, David Garcia, who was murdered in 1993, with giving her the strength to take her story to authorities.

On her 29th birthday, shortly after her brother's death, Comardelle recalled he always had been the first to call to wish her a happy birthday.

"All day long I wanted to hear from David," she recalled. "I was dozing in my recliner chair and David came to me and said, 'The

A CRY FOR HELP

How to report child sexual abuse

► To report cases of incest, call the state Department of Social Services' Child Protection Hotline or the police.

► The hotline numbers are **483-4911** in New Orleans, **736-7025** in East Jefferson, **381-6083** in West Jefferson, **363-5618** in Plaquemines Parish and **278-7333** in St. Bernard Parish.

► There are no local hotline numbers for St. Tammany, St. Charles, St. John and St. James parishes. Authorities in those parishes urge victims to call the police.

Source: Staff research

truth will set you free.' It gave me the strength" to approach authorities.

Comardelle has rejected efforts made by family members to persuade her to enter therapy.

"I don't believe in paying someone to listen to my problems," she said. "I lived through it. Why do I need therapy now?"

She has four other children. They, along with her job as the night manager of a Boutte restaurant, keep her going, she said.

Last week, regular customers stopped by or called to congratulate her on Rolland's conviction. Although the initial newspaper article did not name her or her stepfather, her customers knew.

"A lot of people ask, 'Anne, why aren't you whacked out?'" Comardelle said. "It's just God has a mission for me. God made me strong for some reason. I'm raising four children. I have a career. I'm going through an ugly divorce right now.

"I am living, breathing proof that you can make something of yourself if you want to."