

# Brenda Spencer: Sorting Out the Contradictions

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Note: Though I have written about Spencer elsewhere, including in the article “Expanding the Sample: Five School Shooters” and my book *School Shooters: Understanding High School, College, and Adult Perpetrators*, I have since obtained the transcripts of Spencer’s five parole board hearings, which provide new material for analysis. These documents are from 1993, 1994, 2001, 2005, and 2009, and are available at [www.schoolshooters.info](http://www.schoolshooters.info).

The purpose of this article is not to tell the life story of Brenda Spencer, but to set the record straight as much as possible by examining claims she has made since her imprisonment in 1979. Two methods of analysis will be utilized: identifying contradictions in Spencer’s own reporting, and comparing her reports to what is known from other sources. The latter information is taken from a book by Eric Hart titled *Does Anyone Like Mondays? The Brenda Spencer Murder Case*, which was published in 2012, and is the single best source I am aware of regarding Spencer. Hart was a private investigator involved in the case and interviewed Spencer’s mother, father, brother, sister, friends, and neighbors within months of the attack. Thus, he had first-hand contact with the most significant people in Spencer’s life.

This article might also be instructive in providing insight into the dynamics of psychopathic personalities, demonstrating the challenges in sorting out fact from fiction when dealing with such perpetrators.

## SPENCER’S REPUTATION

Spencer had the reputation of “talking big,” making claims that were either exaggerations of the truth or complete fabrications. Her sister, Teresa, commented:

She often bragged about what she would do to someone . . . but she never carried forth with her threats . . . She would also brag about taking heavy drugs, but when she described their effects and what they looked like, I knew she was not telling the truth.<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, Spencer, who by all accounts loved animals and would never engage in cruelty to them, reportedly told a peer that she had set a cat’s tail on fire. The girl didn’t believe her,<sup>2</sup> and there is no evidence that she ever did so. Another peer commented that Spencer apparently enjoyed “saying things that just were not true in order to get attention.”<sup>3</sup>

During her attack, she told a reporter, “I’ve gotten into some fights, but they usually don’t last long. I usually open their skulls with a cleaver.”<sup>4</sup> Later that day, she told a police officer, “I had a

### BRENDA SPENCER

Date: **29 January 1979**  
School: **Cleveland Elementary School**  
Location: **San Diego, CA**  
Age: **16**  
Killed: **2**  
Wounded: **9**  
Outcome: **Prison**  
Shooter population: **Secondary school**  
Psychological type: **Psychopathic**  
Attack type: **Mixed** (shot random strangers but deliberately sought to kill police)

For an explanation of the populations, psychological types, and attack types, see “About the Site” at [schoolshooters.info](http://schoolshooters.info).

fight with a friend over a dope deal. He had ripped me off. I had to split his head wide open.”<sup>5</sup> There is no evidence to support such assertions. None of her family members, friends, peers, or neighbors reported any such incidents, and though Spencer had prior run-ins with the police, they were not for fighting (one was for shoplifting and one for burglary / breaking and entering).

## PRIOR DISCUSSIONS OF KILLING

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During her hearing in 2001, Spencer was asked, “Did you ever talk to your friends . . . about committing crimes?” She responded, “No.”<sup>6</sup>

There is abundant evidence that contradicts this. Here are a few comments from her peers:

- “She wanted to ‘blow a police officer’s head off.’”<sup>7</sup>
- She “told a fellow student that she ‘would blow his brains out with a gun.’”<sup>8</sup>
- “She stated on occasion that she would be famous. She would joke about being a sniper. This was in the ninth grade. We would laugh about blasting people away. She hated all authority, particularly the police.”<sup>9</sup>
- She “told another friend that she would make a good sniper and that if she had to hole up in her residence for a long period of time she had enough ammunition to do so.”<sup>10</sup>

Her most significant discussions of crime, however, were with her friend Roderick “Brent” Fleming. He had been arrested with her during both the shoplifting and burglary incidents. They were literally partners in crime. Here are his recollections:

Brenda and I were always kind of planning things but we never really carried them out. Brenda used to say that there were three dominations in the world. The first domination was people who planned things. The second domination was the people who did minor things like misdemeanors. Then there was the third type of domination like major things such as sniping or burning or blowing things up . . . Brenda said that we were like the third type.<sup>11</sup>

Lots of times we would plan things like going to kill a cop or blow up a school or mug somebody for their money. Her most favorite thing was to kill a cop.

She had two plans to kill a cop. The first was that I would take her .22 pellet gun and she would take her dad’s Luger v.b. gun. We would go to the park where the cops did their reports. The plan was that I was to go to the passenger side window as she walked over to the driver’s window if it was up. She would ask the driver to roll the window down. She’d use the pretense of maybe asking what time it was. When he did roll the window down, she was going to tell him that if he moved, that I was going to blow his head off. She would say things like I had a hair trigger. I was going to stand there pointing the gun at the

officer . . . The second plan to kill a cop was to egg his car or break his window. We planned on running then and have him chase us into the boy’s bathroom. We knew that the cop would probably chase us into the bathroom and when he got in there, she would hit him in the face with an ax.<sup>12</sup>

## THE RIFLE USED IN THE ATTACK

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Spencer’s father (Wally) gave her a .22 rifle for Christmas, just a few weeks before her attack. In 2001 she claimed that because he gave her a rifle, “I felt like he wanted me to kill myself.”<sup>13</sup> In 2009, she insisted that she did not want the rifle as a present, but had actually asked for a radio.<sup>14</sup> This statement is contradicted by her own family members.

In 1979, her sister, Teresa, said, “I can specifically remember her bugging him about . . . getting her a .22 rifle. She had been asking him for a long time. He finally got it for her this last Christmas.”<sup>15</sup> Her mother commented, “I hit the ceiling when I heard that Wally gave her a .22 rifle for Christmas. Brenda told me that is what she wanted.”<sup>16</sup> Though her mother was not happy about the gift, Spencer made clear that this was the gift she had asked for.

## LEAKAGE

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Two days before her attack, Brent Fleming spent the day with Spencer. Fleming reported,

I went over there Saturday and I visited with her. She said that she was going to do something real big Monday . . . She just said, “Wait until Monday and see what I’m going to do. It might even be big enough to make the news.”<sup>17</sup>

Spencer also reportedly told Fleming that she would shoot out a window for him.<sup>18</sup>

Fifteen years after the attack, Spencer denied that her comments had anything to do with her attack. She stated, “We were talking about a party that was going to be happening.”<sup>19</sup> Why there would be a big party on a Monday, and why it would make the news, she did not explain. Nor did she explain the connection between a party and shooting out a window.

Thirty years after the attack, Spencer denied ever making comments to Fleming about “something real big” happening. At this point, she insisted, “I didn’t tell Roderick Fleming the weekend prior that I was going to do something big and it would be on the news. He was the kind that liked to get attention and liked to be the big man on campus, so I think that’s why he said that.”<sup>20</sup>

Spencer changed from claiming that her comments didn’t mean what everyone thought they meant, to stating that she never made them in the first place.

## HER CONDITION AND BEHAVIOR DURING THE ATTACK

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During the attack, Spencer denied any planning for the shooting, claiming, “I just thought of it this morning.”<sup>21</sup> As just discussed, she had talked about the upcoming attack with Fleming two days before, and had also discussed committing a sniper attack to multiple peers over a long period of time. Her claim that she just had the idea to shoot people that morning was a lie.

In 1993, fourteen years after her attack, Spencer made two claims during her parole hearings. First she said that she was so drunk and high on drugs that “I started to hallucinate. I saw these commando types. All these people in para-military gear advancing on me from out of the school yard. It was so real. I barricaded myself in, got my rifle and started firing.”<sup>22</sup>

Though the issue of her substance use will be examined in the following section, the claim that she was so impaired by substances that she was hallucinating is completely at odds with her behavior during the attack. She spoke with both a reporter and a law enforcement negotiator while she was holed up in her house, which is where she conducted a sniper attack on the elementary school across the street.

When the reporter asked her why she was shooting people, she responded, “This is a way to cheer up Monday. Oh, by the way, I nailed me a good pig [i.e., police officer].”<sup>23</sup> When asked if she were aware that she had shot three or four people, she said, “Gee, is that all? I thought there were a lot more. I saw lots of feathers flying.”<sup>24</sup> She then ended the conversation by saying, “Sorry, I have to go. I want to shoot some more. I wanna get me another pig.”<sup>25</sup>

Later in the day, while still in position in her house, she told the negotiator, “I’m having a lot of fun.”<sup>26</sup> She went on:

I’m gonna stay here awhile. I want to have some more fun. It was fun seeing kids being shot in a group ... It looked like a herd of cows standing around the one that was shot. It was really easy pickings. It was fun to watch the kids that had red or blue ski jackets. They made the best targets. It was like shooting ducks in a pond it was so easy. I enjoyed watching them squirm around after they had been shot.<sup>27</sup>

She then expressed her frustration with the custodian because he was trying to get the children out of harm’s way, which was interfering with her fun:

She said that the custodian came out and attempted to get everybody off the school grounds and out of the way, at which time she said she shot him. And she shot him because, by her own words, he was making it more difficult for her to shoot the kids, because he was getting the targets out of the way.<sup>28</sup>

Bantering with the officer,

she paused. “Let me give you some advice. Don’t chew bubble gum and drink whiskey at the same time. It ruins

the bubblegum and you have to throw it away. Also, m&ms and beer are a bad combination. It’ll make you sick.” She then roared with laughter.<sup>29</sup>

During the shooting there were no comments about commandos. Spencer was not in a panic about being attacked. She knew exactly what she was doing and was enjoying herself. She laughed with the reporter and she laughed with the negotiator. Her words were not slurred from alcohol and she had a steady hand and was able to shoot people a long way off.

During the same hearing, just minutes after talking about the hallucinations of commandos, Spencer came out with a new and contradictory claim:

The S.W.A.T. team lied in court about how many shots they fired, and in what direction they were fired. A big question now emerges as to who, if anyone, was hit from fire from my rifle and who was hit by police fire.<sup>30</sup>

She stated, “They [the S.W.A.T. team] lied about not firing at me in the house, and they also apparently lied about not firing toward the school yard.”<sup>31</sup>

In other words, having just admitted she shot at people in response to hallucinations, she then argued that she did not shoot the victims, the police officers did. Not only were both claims false, but they are mutually exclusive. (Spencer did not make the claim about hallucinations of people attacking her in the hearings in 1994, 2001, or 2005, but returned to it in 2009.)<sup>32</sup>

Having claimed in 1993 that she shot at people because she thought they were attacking her, and also that she didn’t shoot anybody, in 1994 she said that she did fire the gun, but was not aiming at anybody: “I was just aiming up.”<sup>33</sup> She repeated this claim in 2001, stating: “I just stuck the rifle out the window and started shooting.”<sup>34</sup>

The parole board did not accept this, pointing out that she would not have wounded and killed the people she did if she had not been aiming carefully. In fact, Spencer’s later claims of not having shot at people were contradicted by her own earlier comments. For her first parole hearing (1993) she prepared a written statement that was read into the record that included the acknowledgment that “on January 29, 1979 [she] barricaded herself in her family home and began firing at students and teachers in the elementary school yard across the street.”<sup>35</sup>

## SUBSTANCE ABUSE

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The issue of Spencer’s substance use, both in general and specifically on the day of the attack, is a bit murky. As noted above, she claimed to do hard drugs, but her sister didn’t believe these claims. Both her brother and sister, however, acknowledged that she smoked marijuana.<sup>36</sup>

Though Spencer gave up the claim that the police shot the victims, she has continued to argue that she was extremely high on drugs during the attack. These claims have at times been ex-

treme. In 1993 she said, “I had potentially lethal levels of drugs in my system at the time”<sup>37</sup> and insisted that this was proven by drug screens conducted following her arrest. In 1994, she said that she was so high that she had no recollection of that day: “I don’t remember the shooting at all”<sup>38</sup> and “I don’t remember shooting anything.”<sup>39</sup> She then immediately contradicted this and admitted seeing police officers, admitted firing her gun, and acknowledging that she remembered shooting an officer who was helping a victim.<sup>40</sup>

In 2001 her claim was even more extreme: she said that used so many drugs that she had no memory of events for five days, from 26 January through 31 January (her attack was on 29 January).<sup>41</sup> During that same hearing, however, she recalled, “I just stuck the rifle out the window and started shooting,”<sup>42</sup> obviously contradicting her claim that she had no memory of the events.

Though she was not noticeably impaired during the attack, drug screens were conducted. Their results have not been made public, but they were referred to multiple times during the hearings over the years. In 1993, it was stated, “Blood and urine samples proved negative for all forms of substances: alcohol and drugs.”<sup>43</sup> Spencer argued that the results actually proved she was severely under the influence but that she was a victim of a conspiracy of silence: “The prosecutor and my own defense attorney covered up this fact and withheld this evidence from the court, and withheld it from all the doctors and psychiatrists who did reports and evaluations on me.”<sup>44</sup>

In 1994, Spencer continued to insist that she was high during the attack, claiming, “I have the toxicology reports that show I was on drugs and alcohol.”<sup>45</sup> No such reports were presented, however.

Confusing the matter is the report that more than one set of drug screens were conducted. As discussed in 2009, one screening of a blood sample reportedly found no alcohol in her system.<sup>46</sup> Similarly, “A urine sample was taken and a drug screen was done, negative for drugs, including the PCP and marijuana, which tends to have a very long half life.”<sup>47</sup> Spencer’s lawyer, however, stated that another screening found some alcohol (the amount was not specified) as well as Tegretol, a medication Spencer took for seizures.<sup>48</sup> If this test were accurate, then Spencer had been drinking at some point before or during the attack, but as noted above, there were no signs that she was drunk, and there was certainly no evidence of “potentially lethal levels of drugs” in her system.

Despite the minimal findings of the drug screens, Spencer insisted that she had been completely impaired by substances on the day of the attack.

## ABUSE AND NEGLECT

Spencer said nothing about abuse and neglect during her first two parole hearings. Beginning in 2001 (22 years after her attack), however, she began claiming she had been horribly

abused. She first made allegations of sexual abuse against her father in 2001. In 2009, she claimed that both parents neglected her and that her father, brother, and sister all were abusive. She also added that she was bullied by her peers.

Allegations of abuse need to be taken seriously; I never want to minimize anyone’s victimization. As with all the other issues addressed so far, however, Spencer’s reporting is contradictory. These contradictions will be noted. In addition, her comments about her family will be compared to what others have said. Though abuse, especially incest, is typically a secret that outsiders could not be expected to be aware of, Spencer’s comments about her family are vastly different from what is reported by others. Her various allegations will be addressed one by one.

### *The Bicycle Accident*

In 2005, Spencer claimed that her father kicked her in the head so hard that she had a head injury. According to Spencer, he covered this up by claiming that she hurt herself in a bicycle accident.<sup>49</sup> In 2009, Spencer’s lawyer presented the incident as part of a pattern of ongoing abuse that caused significant trauma:

On one occasion when Ms. Spencer was 14 years old, when her father kicked her in the head and brutally beat her, she staggered to her mother’s house with a serious head injury, but her mother didn’t take her to the hospital because she was afraid that she may not have the legal right to seek medical attention for her daughter. So this extreme abuse and neglect that characterized Ms. Spencer’s childhood caused her to develop severe depression, suicidal tendencies, and chronic, complex post-traumatic stress disorder.<sup>50</sup>

Spencer even claimed that though her sister took her to the hospital, the examining physician never bothered to ask her how she was injured.<sup>51</sup>

The problem is that according to the other members of Spencer’s family, this incident never happened. The description quoted above was given in 2009, more than thirty years after the fact. Back in 1979, long before Spencer ever made any allegations that her father kicked her in the head, Eric Hart interviewed her family members. Hart was not investigating the allegations of abuse because no such allegations had been made. In the course of his conversations with Spencer’s mother, brother, and sister, however, they all mentioned the bicycle accident.

- Her brother, Scott, said: “Brenda was in a bike accident two or three years ago. She hit a pole head on. She blacked out and was woozy the next day.”<sup>52</sup>
- Her sister, Teresa, said: “Two years ago she had a bike accident in which she struck her head.”<sup>53</sup>
- Her mother, Dorothy, said: “A couple of years ago she hit a pole while riding her bike. She was in a complete daze.”<sup>54</sup>

Despite her sister recalling the bicycle accident, Spencer claimed



that it was her sister who told her it was abuse:

I remember him [her father] coming home from work and being all mad and smacking me in the head. I remember waking up the next day and wondering why my head hurt so bad and that was when my sister told me that he had kicked me in the head.<sup>55</sup>

Spencer apparently took a real incident and twisted it to make herself a victim.

## *Sexual Abuse*

In 2001 Spencer told the parole board, “I was sexually abused by my father.”<sup>56</sup> The commissioner commented that he saw no mention of this in her records and asked, “And you never told your probation officer or counselor?” – to which Spencer replied, “No.”<sup>57</sup> They came back to this issue a few minutes later when the commissioner said, “You’re telling us your father beat you and molested you,” and Spencer replied, “Yes, he did.” Again the commissioner asked, “And you never reported any abuse?” Spencer said, “No. I was scared to.”<sup>58</sup>

After moving on to other issues, they came back to the incest allegations yet another time. The commissioner once again noted the lack of documentation regarding this. This time, instead of maintaining that this was because she had never told anybody, Spencer reversed her position and claimed that she told her psychologists but they said “I’m trying to put it off on my father” and therefore never made any mention of it in their records.<sup>59</sup>

The commissioner said he was very troubled by these allegations and asked about initiating an investigation into the matter and whether or not Spencer would testify. At this point she made an extraordinary claim:

SPENCER: There has already been an investigation done.

COMMISSIONER: By whom?

SPENCER: Right after I got arrested.

COMMISSIONER: Who investigated?

SPENCER: The City of San Diego.

COMMISSIONER: But you told me you hadn’t told anyone about it.

SPENCER: I had told my counselors.<sup>60</sup>

This was a remarkable exchange in two ways. First, Spencer had twice clearly stated earlier in the hearing that she had not told anyone about the incest, claiming that she had been afraid to disclose this information. When the commissioner took her allegations seriously, she contradicted herself and said she had told her counselors. What is more remarkable, however, is that she was telling someone who was overseeing her case that since being in prison her incest allegations had not only been reported but had been investigated by the police. She said this despite the fact that the commissioner had reviewed her record and informed her that there was no mention of any claims of sexual abuse.

There are yet more contradictions, though they are smaller in scale. In 2001 she reported that the incest occurred “till I was 14.”<sup>61</sup> In 2009, the incest reportedly lasted until she was 16.<sup>62</sup> In 2009, she first said that the molestation began at 9, and then later in the hearing it was reported as starting at age 7.<sup>63</sup>

Spencer made another startling claim in 2009, reporting that her father had admitted the incest and apologized to her.<sup>64</sup> Though Mr. Spencer wrote letters in support of Spencer’s parole, no letter was ever produced in the hearing to indicate that he had admitted to any sexual misconduct.

## *Physical and Emotional Abuse*

Having made the incest allegations in 2001, in the 2005 hearing Spencer added allegations of physical abuse by her father: “I remember being hit in the face a lot. Being hit in the ribs. Being yelled at, called names.”<sup>65</sup> In 2009, she added allegations that her brother also was physically abusive: “My older brother would also smack me around and grab me by the throat and toss me around.”<sup>66</sup> Then she added her sister to her abusers, claiming, “My father, brother and sister all verbally abused me.”<sup>67</sup> She also added her peers to the list of victimizers, stating, “I got picked on constantly about my looks, my clothes.”<sup>68</sup> Nor could she let her mother be unaccused: “I was neglected by my mother and father.”<sup>69</sup> She complained that her parents didn’t take care of her, that she had to cook for herself and fend for herself from an early age.

Of course, she could have been abused and neglected. What is puzzling is that if there were extenuating circumstances or mitigating factors in her case, why did she wait up to thirty years to mention them? For example, why didn’t she ever say a word about being bullied by her peers until her fifth parole hearing?

Is there any evidence to support her allegations? No. Is there evidence that suggests the allegations are false? Yes. For example, Spencer and her brother Scott reportedly not only got along, but he was something of a hero to her. Teresa, her sister, said, “She really looked up to him.”<sup>70</sup> Scott was aware of this, commenting, “I know from what others have told me, she idolized me.”<sup>71</sup> There were no reports of Scott ever mistreating his sister, and yet, Spencer claimed thirty years later that the brother she idolized not only verbally abused her but grabbed her by the throat and tossed her around.

Spencer’s relationship with her father was not always harmonious, but there were no reports that he ever mistreated her. In fact, multiple reports suggest that Spencer was often a defiant child who posed serious challenges to her father as a parent. Brent Fleming’s mother said:

“I can’t remember any discipline or her being put on restriction,” the woman said. When there were problems, [Mr.] Spencer would break down and cry, the woman said, and ask the girl, “Why do you do these things?”<sup>72</sup>

In other words, the daughter caused the father to suffer, rather than the other way around.

Scott Spencer made the following observations:

They [Brenda and their father] shared a lot of interests, such as photography, hiking, and they went a lot to the mountains ... My dad rarely had to physically punish us. He had good control of me and Brenda. He was somewhat strict when we were young kids. However, I thought in recent years he was too lenient with Brenda, in that he should have punished her sometimes rather than simply take the time to explain why he was upset with her. Basically, they had a great relationship.<sup>73</sup>

Because Scott made such a casual reference to physical punishment, this presumably was along the lines of a spanking rather than abuse. Spencer's sister Teresa commented:

Brenda was a very difficult person to get along with. She was especially difficult to please. She always wanted things her own way and often talked back to my father. When she wanted something badly, she would keep after him until she got it ... My father really tried to make her happy. He spent an incredible amount of time with her. They would go to the mountains every weekend. He did not require her to do any chores, and he placed few restrictions on her. I did the housework ... Brenda liked my dad, but she seemed to prefer our mom. I think that was because there were no rules at mom's house ... My dad, however, required her to conform somewhat to house rules. I think she was a headache to him in that she often talked back, but he spent a lot of time with her and did a lot of things for her.<sup>74</sup>

This supports the comments made by Ms. Fleming, indicating that the relationship was harder on the father than on Spencer. Spencer's mother said:

It seems that over the last couple of years they [Brenda and father] got along really well, especially the last year when Wally began spending so much time with her ... I do not think, especially a couple of years ago, that he disciplined her enough. She could always wrap him around her finger. He never spanked her. She would always get her way.<sup>75</sup>

A friend of the family noted:

I thought that Wally and Brenda had a terrific relationship. He spent a tremendous amount of time with her and was trying to really help her. She seemed to respect him and to love him ... They often teased each other and joked around.<sup>76</sup>

This hardly sounds like the relationship of a girl who was beaten, molested, and neglected by her father. In fact, several people indicated that Spencer was difficult to manage and suggested that Mr. Spencer should have done more to control his headstrong and manipulative daughter.

Finally, the claim of chronic harassment by peers is not supported by anyone else's testimony. In fact, there is evidence that Spencer was more of a bully than a victim of bullies. She

and Fleming intimidated the girls who reported their breaking and entering at the elementary school.<sup>77</sup> In fact, an adult who knew Spencer commented, "She mentioned at that time that some people were afraid of her."<sup>78</sup>

There are several counts against believing the allegations of abuse and neglect. The first is that virtually nothing else Spencer claimed in her hearings was true; on this basis, there is little reason to believe these allegations. Second, if they were true, there is no reason she couldn't have mentioned them at the time of her arrest. Finally, there is the evidence of her family members themselves, as well as others who knew the family. Though abuse can occur in secret, the complete lack of any hint of mistreatment by her family and the multiple positive comments about Spencer's relationship with her father suggest that she was lying about this just like she lied about so many other things. A comment during the 2009 hearing sums up the matter: "the nature, extent and history of physical and sexual abuse has only one source, the inmate, who lies about what happened the day of the incident."<sup>79</sup>

## DEPRESSION AND SUICIDE

Spencer claimed that the shooting was really a suicide attempt.<sup>80</sup> She said she was so depressed that she wanted the police to shoot her. This is completely at odds with the actual attack. She did not commit the attack in public as most school shooters have done, but from the safety of her own home. If she wanted the police to shoot her, all she had to do was walk outside and fire at them. Her claim is also completely at odds with her behavior during the attack, in which she was laughing and talking about how much fun she was having. She was excited about being taken out in handcuffs<sup>81</sup> and excited to be on television<sup>82</sup> (just like she had told Brent Fleming she would be). Finally, she had talked to multiple peers about wanting to be a sniper, as well as her desire to kill police officers. The claim that she was so depressed that she just wanted to die simply doesn't hold up to scrutiny.

Regarding a history of depression and suicide attempts, there are contradictions and a couple of murky comments. In 1994, when the commissioner asked, "Had you ever tried to commit suicide before?," Spencer answered, "No."<sup>83</sup> In 2001, when she was asked, "Had you attempted suicide prior to that [the attack]?" Spencer said, "Yes, I had." She claimed, "I overdosed on drugs. I cut my wrists" in "'78 and '77."<sup>84</sup> By 2009, however, she claimed she had made about five suicide attempts prior to the shooting.<sup>85</sup> With the passing of time, the number of suicide attempts she reported increased.

During the hearing in 1994, the commissioner apparently found a brief mention of Spencer allegedly trying to kill herself by ingesting glue and aspirin,<sup>86</sup> but the source of this is obscure and none of her family members, family friends, or peers reported this to Hart. It may have simply been an example of Spencer saying things to get a reaction from people.

Similarly, a counselor reportedly thought Spencer might be a suicide risk in the fall of 1978 and referred her to a psychiatrist,<sup>87</sup> but there is no indication that this was a valid concern, nor any mention of an actual suicide attempt.

Though Spencer tried to paint a picture of herself as chronically depressed and suicidal long before the attack, this is not supported by any of the significant people in her life. One adult who knew her said she was “cheerful,” and commented, “Around me she was always smiling . . . She was always in good spirits.”<sup>88</sup> Her brother commented, “She was a happy person . . . She spent much of her time taking care of animals. She loved to read and write poetry. She was not a moody person.”<sup>89</sup>

According to her mother:

Brenda had innumerable hobbies. She liked animals. At one point she wanted to be a vet. She loved the outdoors, particularly the mountains. She also read, wrote poetry, and would build things. She loved art. I thought she was very good. She had great potential as a photographer . . . When around me, she was not depressed. She was talkative. She would play with my dogs. She seemed very content with life . . . She seemed to enjoy being around adults.<sup>90</sup>

In fact, her mother noted, “If anything, it seemed like Brenda was happier than ever over this past year.”<sup>91</sup> She described her last time with Spencer before the attack as follows:

The Wednesday before the shooting was the last time I saw her before the incident. She was with Teresa [sister] and a friend of Teresa’s. They went to the Andy Williams Golf Tournament where I work. Brenda was happy and jolly, running around the complex looking at the celebrities.<sup>92</sup>

Similarly, her father observed that the Friday night before her attack “she seemed to be in very good spirits.”<sup>93</sup>

## COMMENTS

Based on the available information, it appears that virtually every claim Brenda Spencer has made during her parole hearings has been false. These false claims fall into two general categories: avoiding responsibility and garnering sympathy. She first made several claims to avoid accepting responsibility for shooting people:

- She claimed she shot them due to hallucinations of commandos attacking her.
- She claimed she didn’t shoot them; the S.W.A.T. team did.
- She claimed she fired the rifle but didn’t aim and therefore had not intended to hurt anybody.
- She claimed she had taken so many substances that she blacked out and therefore had no idea what she had done.
- She claimed she only shot to draw police to the house so that they would kill her.

When these claims did not result in her getting parole, she then made allegations that she had been abused and neglected by virtually everyone in her life:

- She claimed her father sexually molested her.
- She claimed her father and brother physically abused her.
- She claimed her father, brother, and sister emotionally abused her.
- She claimed her mother and father neglected her.
- She claimed her peers bullied her.

She then claimed that because of all this abuse and neglect, she had been depressed and suicidal for years. Though she initially reported no suicide attempts prior to the shooting, she ended up stating she had made approximately five attempts on her life.

As noted throughout this article, her claims were frequently self-contradictory. They were also at odds with the reports of all the most important people in her life. She not only lied about the primary issue of responsibility for the attack, but smaller issues as well, such as her comments to Brent Fleming about what she was going to do, about not having asked for the rifle as a present, and about not having ever talked with peers about committing crimes.

The entire thrust of her allegations is that she was not responsible for her actions, that she was a victim. She was a victim of the drugs she took. She was a victim of the police and the court and her own attorney who hid the results of the drug tests. She was a victim of the S.W.A.T. team who shot people and blamed it on her. She was a victim of her father, mother, brother, sister, and peers who abused and neglected her. She was a victim of her depression and suicidal desires.

Making claims to avoid responsibility or gain sympathy is a behavior seen in other psychopathic school shooters who survived their attacks. For example, Andy Williams initially told police he had not been bullied, but as the trial progressed, he came out with numerous claims of severe harassment. Just as Spencer claimed she wasn’t aiming and thus didn’t intend to hurt anybody, Williams claimed that despite having shot fifteen people, he never meant to hurt anyone. Also like Spencer, after years in prison, he made an allegation that he had been sexually molested.<sup>94</sup> There was no evidence to support this claim, and given all his other lies, it appears to have been a fabrication.

Similarly, T.J. Lane initially claimed a wide variety of symptoms of mental illness after his imprisonment, including hallucinations, delusions, and severe depression. He also claimed that he had been molested. He later admitted that all of these claims were lies.<sup>95</sup> He stated that he figured it “couldn’t hurt” to claim he was a victim of sexual abuse. Other psychopathic shooters, including Robert Benjamin Smith<sup>96</sup> and Wayne Lo,<sup>97</sup> tried to avoid a harsh prison sentence by faking insanity. Spencer’s post-attack claims resemble those of other psychopathic shooters who tried to deny responsibility and/or elicit sympathy in order to mitigate the consequences of their crimes.

## CONCLUSION

The constant dishonesty on the part of psychopathic shooters appears to be the result of several traits. First, their lack of empathy and lack of conscience apparently result in their simply not seeing the significance of having harmed or killed human beings. It just doesn't register with them. In addition, they seem constitutionally incapable of accepting responsibility for their actions. Dr. Robert Hare, an expert in psychopaths, commented on their "remarkable ability to rationalize their behavior and to shrug off personal responsibility."<sup>98</sup> When this is combined with a flagrant disregard for the truth, it becomes natural for them to say anything that they think will be to their benefit.

Hare noted this among the inmates he worked with: "The psychopaths among them were expert at distorting and molding the truth to suit their purposes."<sup>99</sup> He cited a psychopath who was asked if he ever told lies. The man responded: "Are you kidding? I lie like I breathe, one as much as the other."<sup>100</sup> Hare explained this tendency:

With their powers of imagination in gear and focused on themselves, psychopaths appear amazingly unfazed by the possibility — or even by the certainty — of being found out. When caught in a lie or challenged with the truth, they are seldom perplexed or embarrassed — they simply change their stories or attempt to rework the facts so that they appear to be consistent with the lie.<sup>101</sup>

This tendency is particularly challenging to deal with when psychopaths claim to be victims, which is very common: "They view themselves as poorly treated and thus victims. They constantly cry 'victim' when things do not go as they want."<sup>102</sup> This is exactly what happened with Brenda Spencer. The longer she was denied parole, the more she claimed she was a victim.

A sensitive person is likely to want to believe a story of victimization rather than risk being callous to someone who is reporting a history of incest or other kinds of abuse. Psychopaths are remarkably good at knowing how to appeal to other people's sense of empathy in order to manipulate them. To quote Hare a final time: "A good psychopath can play a concerto on anyone's heartstrings."<sup>103</sup> That is the danger in talking with a psychopath; that, and sorting out truth from fiction.

## NOTES

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- 4 Hart, *Murder Case*, p. 18.
- 5 Hart, *Murder Case*, p. 24.
- 6 "Brenda Spencer Parole Board Hearing 2001," p. 25.
- 7 Hart, *Murder Case*, p. 42.

- 8 Hart, *Murder Case*, p. 42.
- 9 Hart, *Murder Case*, p. 82.
- 10 "Brenda Spencer Parole Board Hearing 2005," p. 20.
- 11 Hart, *Murder Case*, p. 34.
- 12 Hart, *Murder Case*, pp. 34–35.
- 13 "Hearing 2001," p. 13.
- 14 "Brenda Spencer Parole Board Hearing 2009," p. 76.
- 15 Hart, *Murder Case*, p. 76.
- 16 Hart, *Murder Case*, p. 79.
- 17 Hart, *Murder Case*, pp. 35–36.
- 18 "Hearing 1993," p. 25.
- 19 "Brenda Spencer's Parole Board Hearing 1994," p. 33.
- 20 "Hearing 2009," p. 98.
- 21 Hart, *Murder Case*, p. 24.
- 22 "Brenda Spencer's Parole Board Hearing 1993," p. 9.
- 23 Hart, *Murder Case*, p. 18.
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- 27 Hart, *Murder Case*, p. 23.
- 28 Hart, *Murder Case*, pp. 81–82.
- 29 Hart, *Murder Case*, p. 24.
- 30 "Hearing 1993," p. 10.
- 31 "Hearing 1993," p. 10.
- 32 "Hearing 2009," p. 72.
- 33 "Hearing 1994," p. 11.
- 34 "Hearing 2001," p. 68.
- 35 "Hearing 1993," p. 7.
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- 37 "Hearing 1993," p. 10.
- 38 "Hearing 1994," p. 6.
- 39 "Hearing 1994," p. 10.
- 40 "Hearing 1994," pp. 10, 11, 36.
- 41 "Hearing 2001," p. 20.
- 42 "Hearing 2001," p. 68.
- 43 "Hearing 1993," p. 7.
- 44 "Hearing 1993," p. 10.
- 45 "Hearing 1994," p. 26.
- 46 "Hearing 2009," p. 83.
- 47 "Hearing 2009," p. 83.
- 48 "Hearing 2009," p. 92.
- 49 "Hearing 2005," p. 10.
- 50 "Hearing 2009," p. 93.
- 51 "Hearing 2009," p. 56.
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- 53 Hart, *Murder Case*, p. 78.
- 54 Hart, *Murder Case*, p. 85.
- 55 "Hearing 2005," p. 34.
- 56 "Hearing 2001," p. 15.
- 57 "Hearing 2001," p. 16.
- 58 "Hearing 2001," pp. 22–23.
- 59 "Hearing 2001," pp. 50–51.



- 60 "Hearing 2001," pp. 52–53.
- 61 "Hearing 2001," p. 16.
- 62 "Hearing 2009," p. 93.
- 63 "Hearing 2009," pp. 21, 50.
- 64 "Hearing 2009," p. 22.
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- 67 "Hearing 2009," pp. 24–25.
- 68 "Hearing 2009," p. 27.
- 69 "Hearing 2009," pp. 25–26.
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- 71 Hart, *Murder Case*, p. 72.
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- 79 "Hearing 2009," p. 84.
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- 81 Hart, *Murder Case*, p. 26.
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- 83 "Hearing 1994," p. 6.
- 84 "Hearing 2001," pp. 13, 14.
- 85 "Hearing 2009," p. 75.
- 86 "Hearing 1994," pp. 8–9.
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