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A Bridge Too Far

Residency restrictions have forced child sex offenders in Florida to camp out under a causeway. Now the man who helped put them there is having second thoughts.

by Catharine Skipp

In 1996 Ron and Pat Book hired a nanny to help manage their frenetic household in Plantation, Fla. Ron is one of the state's most powerful lobbyists and was traveling constantly. Pat was consumed with running a chocolate shop she had recently opened. So they needed a hand tending to their three kids: Lauren, 11; Samantha, 7; and Chase, 4. The couple had already cycled through numerous nannies who didn't work out and felt fortunate to find Waldina Flores, who seemed attentive, efficient, and firm-handed.

For Lauren, though, Flores's arrival marked the beginning of a private horror. One day early on, the nanny asked the girl to spit out her chewing gum. When Lauren refused, Flores leaned in, stuck her tongue into Lauren's mouth, and removed the gum with it. Flores explained herself the next day by saying that was how people behaved when they loved each other. Soon she began molesting the girl in bed at night and watching her shower in the morning. Over time, Flores became more violent. She beat the girl and threw her down the stairs. Once, when Lauren joked to her father at Flores's expense, the nanny later confronted her. "You think you are funny?" Flores asked, according to Lauren. "No. You are s-t." And then she defecated on her.

Lauren's parents didn't suspect anything. Flores was canny about concealing her abusiveness, and Lauren says she was too pliant, confused, and ashamed to divulge what she was enduring. When Lauren's parents asked her one day if she was interested in any guys in her eighth-grade class, Flores set out to find the girl a boyfriend, hoping to avert suspicion. She pointed to a kid in Lauren's yearbook, Kris Lim, and coached her on how to woo him. Lauren and Kris went out and soon became a couple. As the nanny's beatings became worse, Kris noticed Lauren's bruises and asked her how she got them. After lying repeatedly, she eventually confided the truth to him. Kris urged Lauren to tell her parents, but she refused. It wasn't until Flores threatened to kill Kris that Lauren finally relented. In a session in 2001 with her psychiatrist—whom she'd begun seeing because of her despondency and loss of appetite—she shared her saga of abuse. As soon as Lauren left his office, the psychiatrist called Ron Book and asked him to come in the next day to discuss an urgent matter. When Book learned the news, he felt the world had come undone. "I was spinning, spinning, spinning," he says. Much of their session focused on Book's feelings of rage and overwhelming guilt for not having detected his daughter's abuse. He fought back fantasies of violent retribution. In the end, he channeled his wrath into the one arena in which he maneuvers so deftly: the corridors of political power.

Book's relentlessness as a lobbyist is legendary. Compact and pugnacious, he sports a large diamond-studded ring, wears impeccably tailored Brioni suits, and drives a Bentley V12 convertible and an Audi R8. He carries three cell phones, and during the legislative session in Tallahassee you can often see him juggling calls in each ear while also wheedling a passing lawmaker. "His drive, especially toward the end of the session, is like a whirling dervish," says former Florida

House Speaker John Thrasher. Other lobbyists love going against him, because even if they lose — which is likely — they know that fighting “Ronnie” will reap a bounty of billable hours.

In the wake of Lauren’s abuse, Book mounted a legislative onslaught on sexual predators. Among the many measures he championed, the most significant were local residency restrictions that barred registered sex offenders from living within a certain radius—usually 2,500 feet — of places where children gather, like schools, parks, and playgrounds. By the time he was done, Book had helped pass such ordinances in some 60 cities and counties throughout Florida and beyond.

The impact on the offenders was severe. Entire cities were suddenly off limits to them. They became pariahs, confined to remote and shrinking slivers of land. The most egregious example is a colony of predators camped out under the Julia Tuttle Causeway, which spans Miami’s Biscayne Bay — a place so surreal and outlandish that it has become a lightning rod in the debate over America’s treatment of sex offenders. For a long time, Book was unrepentant about having helped create that community of outcasts. Predators, he’ll repeatedly tell you, are “monsters” and “the creeping crud of society.” But eventually the fury began to subside, and was replaced by something Book isn’t accustomed to having: doubts.

At the Julia Tuttle camp, the sex offenders begin trickling in around dusk. It is a squalid and dreary place. The air is thick and stifling, reeking of human feces and of cat urine from all the strays that live there. Overhead, the bridge drones and trembles with six lanes of traffic. Makeshift dwellings sprawl out in every direction—tents clinging to concrete pylons, rickety shacks fashioned out of plywood, a camper shell infested with cockroaches. There is no running water or sewage system; inhabitants relieve themselves in shopping bags and toss the sacks into a pile of refuse that they burn periodically. Some men fish along the shoreline, then gut and fry up the catch for anyone who’s hungry. For diversion, there’s a nightly dominoes game, or perhaps a bottle of booze sipped in solitude.

The three-year-old settlement now numbers more than 70 people, including an 83-year-old deaf man, a wheelchair-bound fellow, and one woman. Some have lived there so long that their driver’s licenses list their addresses as “Julia Tuttle Causeway Bridge.” Every now and then, some succumb to desperation. In early July, one man repeatedly slashed himself with a knife in an apparent suicide attempt and had to be subdued with a stun gun, according to police. Many of them freely admit that society has every right to guard against their reoffending. They just don’t see how sleeping under a bridge accomplishes that. The ordinances stipulate only that they stay there between 10 p.m. and 6 a.m.; come sunrise, they’re free to go. “We could be in front of a school all day, but we are under the bridge when all the kids are at home with their moms at night,” says Osvaldo Castillo, who has been at the camp for a year. “This doesn’t make any sense.”

The causeway colony may be an extreme example, but sex offenders have been similarly uprooted across the country, as lawmakers have seized on residency restrictions in recent years. Thirty states and hundreds of cities and counties—162 in Florida alone—have adopted them in some form. In Iowa, thousands of offenders were displaced, which forced many into shabby motels around Des Moines and others onto the streets. In Suffolk County, N.Y., those left homeless were crammed into a trailer that periodically moved around until finally settling on the grounds of the county jail. Such accounts dismay most experts on sexual crimes. “This very-well-intended policy is making the public less safe,” says Susan Brown-McBride, chair of the California Sex Offender Management Board. It “destabilizes [offenders] by making them homeless.”

Even some staunch supporters of residency restrictions have expressed misgivings after witnessing the chaos the ordinances sow. Florida state Sen. Dan Gelber, whose district is home to

the Julia Tuttle camp, is adamant about the 2,500-foot rule. A father of three, he recently learned, to his dismay, that a registered sex offender who lived six doors down from him was arrested for masturbating in front of some children. Despite his hardline stance, however, Gelber was aghast at what he observed in his first visit to the bridge in early July—the density of the encampment, the sordid conditions. “There has to be another way,” he says.

In the immediate aftermath of that crushing meeting with Lauren’s psychiatrist, Book couldn’t have cared less about crafting enlightened social policy toward sex offenders. His most immediate concern was removing Flores from his home. Later that day, he arranged to pick her up at a nearby office building. When she got in the car, Book told her, “You are going to pack your s–t and get the f–k out of my house.” “What did I do?” he says she asked. “Did Lauren tell you something? Lauren is a liar.” After Flores gathered her things, Book dropped her off at a gas station (and later contacted the police). She fled to Oklahoma but was eventually picked up by authorities and sent back to Florida. The following year, Flores was convicted of sexual battery and lewd and lascivious behavior toward Lauren, and received a 25-year sentence, which she’s serving at a prison in Ocala. (Flores didn’t respond to a letter requesting an interview.)

As Lauren commenced therapy, Book began campaigning for stricter sex-offender laws. When he learned that no mechanism short of a court order existed to force an offender to get tested for HIV, he helped pass a law making such screening mandatory when a victim demands it. When Flores wrote Lauren love letters from jail, he ushered through the Lauren Book Protection Act, which makes any contact by a convicted sex offender with a victim punishable by prison. Book also helped lengthen the statute of limitations for sexual crimes against a minor and secured state funding for victim-treatment centers throughout Florida.

He then turned his attention to residency restrictions. By now, several years had passed, and Lauren had progressed remarkably—so much that she joined her father to press for ordinances throughout the state. They’d visit as many as six cities a week—by car, by commercial plane, by charter jet. In each place, Ron would speak first, conjuring images of predators “peering down into the playground.” Then Lauren would recount her ordeal. Always, “the silence was almost deafening,” says Ron. “There was not a peep in the room.” Aided by the media frenzy surrounding high-profile child abductions, including that of Jessica Lunsford (who was kidnapped, raped, and murdered in 2005), they amassed an impeccable record; according to Ron Book, ordinances succeeded in every jurisdiction where the pair appeared together. They lobbied outside Florida, too—in states like Georgia and South Carolina. Municipalities across the country began calling Book to seek help drafting measures.

Before long, however, the unintended consequences of these laws became apparent. Though some cities and counties passed the measures enthusiastically, just as many enacted them defensively, to prevent castaways from a neighboring jurisdiction from settling in theirs. Janice Washburn watched that happen in her unincorporated enclave of Broadview Park in Broward County, Fla. As one nearby city after another enacted residency restrictions, predators poured in. In August 2007, Broadview Park had four registered offenders. A year later, there were 39. A few months later, there were 106. “It was multiplying like crazy,” says Washburn, who now sits on a county task force to address the matter. In response, Broward County approved an emergency 2,500-foot restriction in April and is now studying whether to pass a formal ordinance. “It is ‘not in my backyard,’ and not a good solution,” says County Commissioner John Rodstrom. But “what are we left with?”

This disorder might be tolerable if the residency policies were effective. But “there is no

evidence that [they] protect children,” says Jill Levenson, a professor of human services at Lynn University in Boca Raton, Fla., who has examined the issue in depth. In Iowa, for example, there was no reduction in the number of reported sex crimes after the restrictions took effect, she says. Moreover, a 2006 National Institute of Justice report found that only 11 percent of female victims under age 12 and 16 percent of comparable males were raped by strangers; most were assaulted by relatives, teachers, and other people they knew. If anything, the residency statutes make things worse, some activists say. In Iowa, the number of predators who absconded doubled in the six months after the restrictions took effect. “If an offender ends up with no residence, that shouldn’t make any of us feel safer,” says Patty Wetterling, whose son’s abduction prompted the creation of the first federal sex-offender registry in 1994. “What they need is stability, support, counseling, and treatment.” (Studies have shown their recidivism rate is typically 10 to 15 percent, and treatment often proves more effective with certain groups, like juveniles, says Richard Wright, associate professor of criminal justice at Bridgewater State College in Massachusetts.)

Though none of these findings deterred Ron Book, they did give Lauren pause. “I have always come from a different place than my dad because I am more empathetic,” she says. “Even with what Waldy did, I don’t hate Waldy ... Something happened in her life that made her who she became.” As conditions worsened beneath the Miami bridge, Lauren came to view it as a public-policy calamity. She began trying to get her father to realize that as well—usually over breakfast in his office. “Dad, we have absconding criminals,” she’d say. “If we can’t monitor them, then we won’t know where they are.” Further encouraging Book to soften his stance was the fact that Lauren, whose suffering had impelled him for years, had grown into a secure and successful woman (now 24, she has a nonprofit, Lauren’s Kids, focused on child abuse, and last year she married Kris Lim).

Earlier this year, Book began reconsidering his position — spurred by lawmakers on both ends of the spectrum who’d begun questioning the wisdom of the ordinances. “I had to take stock and ask myself, ‘Am I in the right place or not?’” he says. In an interview with a Newsweek reporter in June, Book admitted, “I was wrong” — three times. A few days later he had dinner with Levenson, the Lynn University professor, who’s critical of residency laws. “Five years ago, I thought of you as a predator sympathizer,” he told her. “I didn’t see the bigger picture.” He concluded the evening by assuring her, “I will be part of the solution.”

With characteristic tenacity, Book is now trying to undo the bridge fiasco. The battle over the settlement’s fate has recently escalated. In early July the American Civil Liberties Union filed a lawsuit against Miami-Dade County, alleging that its residency restrictions interfere with the state’s ability to monitor offenders. Shortly thereafter, Miami officials sued the state, arguing that the colony should be removed since it lies within 2,500 feet of a tiny island that the city claims is a park (the governor’s office replied in a letter to the city that the Department of Corrections doesn’t place predators under the causeway and that released prisoners bear responsibility for finding housing that conforms with the law).

Book has tried to enlist Gov. Charlie Crist’s help. Twice in the past month, he buttonholed the governor at private gatherings to urge him to take action — perhaps convening a statewide task force to come up with potential legislative fixes. Their more recent exchange grew testy, according to Book. When Crist denied that the Department of Corrections was placing offenders under the causeway, “I said, ‘You are f—king wrong,’” says Book. “I had to walk away. I was f—king annoyed. They don’t even have a clue of a solution.” (In the past week, the governor’s office, which declined to comment on Book’s account to Newsweek, has begun working with him on a solution.) Book,

like his daughter, opposes entirely eliminating the 2,500-foot zones, but he thinks that shrinking them — say, to 1,750 feet — would create sufficient housing options for offenders. The problem, though, is that no public official wants to back a measure that could be depicted as pro-predator.

With chances of a legislative remedy remote for now, Book switched his focus to finding alternative housing for the bridge denizens. He has expertise in the area, given his position as chair of the Miami-Dade Homeless Trust. Several weeks ago, he asked staffers there to try to find possible dwellings in the county that abide by the 2,500-foot rule. They came up with a handful of them, including a former corrections facility owned by Miami-Dade County that was converted to apartments and isn't being used. "It is critical that I spread [the offenders] around," says Book. "If I settle too many in a particular commissioner's district, that will not work." So far, he's found placements for nine of them. But it's not easy. He needs to persuade a host of local and state entities — many with conflicting agendas, and some now embroiled in litigation — to sign off on any deals. "It is wearing me down," said Book late last week. "I don't know where we stand now. But I am going out to the bridge in the next few days. I'm going to see them, so they know that we are trying." The fact that he said this without flinching is a testament to the road he's traveled.

Notes

¹<http://www.newsweek.com/2009/07/24/a-bridge-too-far.html>