

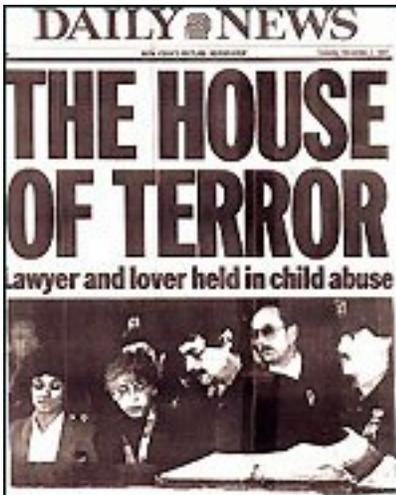
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The Killing of Lisa Steinberg

BY *Mark Gado*



"A Child Not Breathing"



How the New York Daily News broke the story: The House of Terror, November 3, 1987 (Mark Gado)

Officer Vincent Daluise made his way up the narrow, darkened hallway of 14 West 10th Street in New York's Greenwich Village. It was 6:40 a.m. on November 2, 1987. The building, a classical brownstone, was constructed in the 19th century and was Mark Twain's home. Although the West Village is just a short walk from fast-paced midtown Manhattan, it retains the cozy atmosphere of a small, tight-knit community with tree-lined streets and trendy, outdoor cafes. Tenth Street contains dozens of brownstones and 19th century buildings that are expensive, much sought after, and reminiscent of a bygone era.

The cops, along with emergency medical service (EMS) personnel, arrived at the quiet apartment on the second floor. They knocked several times and received no answer. They were dispatched to this address on a job of a child not breathing. Since there was no response, they banged again with the bottom of their fists on the wooden door.

Police! Officer Daluise yelled, Open up! There was another pause.

The door opened very slowly and a woman's face peeked through the slim opening. It was dark inside. Daluise could barely make out details, but her face appeared bruised, mangled, swollen. He thought it was an older woman. She said nothing at first but when asked if she called the police, she said, Yes. As the cops and EMS workers entered the apartment and before they could react to anything else, a man came out of another darkened room. He was carrying a naked child in his arms by the armpits. The child was a little girl, unconscious, bruised and blue. The man said that she had just eaten something and vomited. He told the police he didn't know what happened to her except that she passed out. Then he said that she had been vomiting since the night before. Cops saw additional bruising and welts on the



14 West 10th Street, New York City (Mark Gado)

little girls back. She was filthy. Her feet were coal-black and it appeared she hadn't been bathed in a long, long time.

In the back of the room, cops saw the dim figure of a baby. When they investigated further, they saw that the infant was lying on the floor and tied to a playpen with a length of rope around his waist. His clothes were soaked with urine and his body was covered with dirt. The female that answered the door was wandering around the apartment, hiding behind doors and rubbing her hands together. Her face had cuts and bruises around her eyes and nose. Her lip was split. Later, when she was examined at Bellevue Hospital, doctors found she had several broken ribs, a fractured jaw, a broken nose and severely ulcerated legs. She claimed all her injuries were the result of a fall.

The medics worked feverishly on the girl who was barely breathing and not responding to their efforts. There were red marks on her chest, abdomen and arms. Her long, sandy colored hair was filthy, matted and tangled. The man, who said he was the father, rambled on, offering several different versions of how the girl wound up in such a state. He said that when he saw she wasn't breathing, he gave her CPR. What the medics could not have known at the time was that the girl was suffering from a severe brain injury. She was already in a fatal coma from which she would never emerge., Soon, she would be brain dead, a condition in which the brain emits no discernible activity. It is New York's legal standard for death.

The girl's name was Elizabeth Steinberg, known to all as Lisa. She was six years old. Lisa was allegedly adopted by the man and woman in the apartment and had lived with them almost since birth. The adoptive father's name was Joel Steinberg and the mother's name was Hedda Nussbaum. He was an attorney who worked the criminal courts in Manhattan; she was a former editor and writer of children's books for Random House, one of New York's most famous publishing houses. And together, over a period of six years, they oversaw the sad, anguished life of a little girl who never had a chance against the brutality, neglect and ultimate destruction by two people whose callousness and parental abdication became symbolic of child abuse in America.



Elizabeth 'Lisa' Steinberg (AP)

Joel B. Steinberg



Joel Steinberg
(AP)

Joel Barnet Steinberg was born May 25, 1941. He grew up in the Bronx, but his family moved to the City of Yonkers, a northern suburb of New York City, when he was a teenager. He attended Gorton High School in Yonkers graduating with a distinctly mediocre record., Next, he enrolled in Fordham University, where he graduated with a political science degree in 1962. Steinberg then attended New York University Law School until dropping out in 1964.

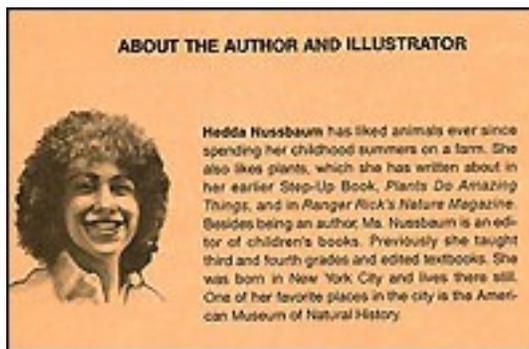
He joined the Air Force the next year. He served overseas until he was honorably discharged as a lieutenant in March 1968.. He resumed law school and eventually graduated in 1970. He was admitted to the bar without taking the bar exam under a special program that made an exception for students whose studies were interrupted by military service. His grades though were less than average and some of his friends later commented about his ability as a lawyer. One of his early law partners, Brian C. Baker, said, Im not

sure you could become friends with him, ultimately. The word manipulative comes up most in my mind. According to those that knew him, Steinberg was often withdrawn and sometimes hostile. Some friends recounted situations in which they described Steinberg as verbally abusive to women.

But there were also good things to be said about Steinberg. He was once described as warm, fatherly and generous. A fellow attorney who knew Steinberg for 17 years said: I think everybody who knew him is shocked. During his early career in the 1970s, Steinberg concentrated on criminal law, including many drug cases. That specialty was not unusual since the docket of Manhattan was filled with drug cases. His talents as an attorney, though, were less than spectacular.

One of his clients recounted that Steinberg himself was an avid drug user. He was constantly talking about drugs, asking everyone to get him drugs, said John Novack, accused of drug smuggling. We were scared to death., Steinberg denied this and said Novack was making a last ditch effort to get out of jail. Another lawyer told *The Daily News* that Steinberg was nice enough, but a little eccentric. He was something of an oddball.

Hedda, the Battered Spouse



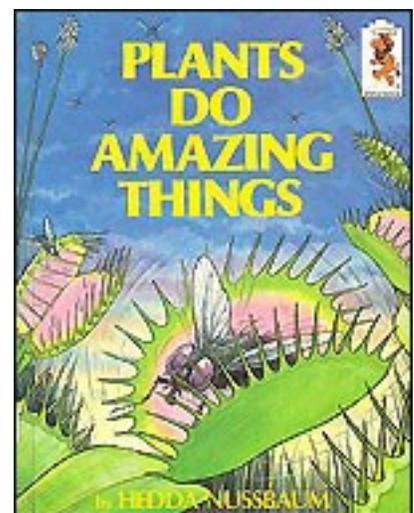
A short biography of Hedda Nussbaum published by Random House

House. *Plants Do Amazing Things* was published in 1977 and was a science book explaining the workings and lives of plants. She had met Joel Steinberg two years earlier at a party. Part of the books dedication read, And to Joel, my everyday inspiration. Soon, they were seeing each other and became romantically involved. I thought he was godlike, she once said. Her second book, *Animals Build Amazing Homes* was published in 1979 and detailed how different animals built their homes in the wild. Both books were well received and remain in print.

Another of Heddas co-workers, Larry Weinberg, who was also an attorney, became friendly with Hedda and admired her ability to work with writers. She was sensitive, extremely gentle and loving to a writer, enormously encouraging, he later said to the press, I was extremely taken with her as a friend. Hedda had a promising future. But that rosy prospect ended when the abuse began.

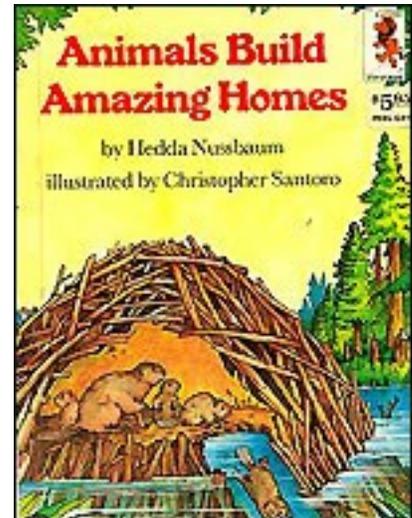
Hedda Nussbaum wanted to be a writer. She graduated from New Yorks Hunter College in the early 1970s and later became a public school teacher. In September 1974, she got a job with Random House, a Manhattan publisher. She was highly regarded and admired by co-workers. An executive at the company told the *New York Times* that she was very attractive as a prospective employee. Hedda was personable and had a wide range of interests. She had the experience of working with kids and she could write, her boss once said.

She wrote two childrens books, both of which were published by Random



Plants Do Amazing Things by Hedda Nussbaum (Mark Gado)

According to Hedda, Steinberg first hit her in 1978. Much to her later regret, she chose to ignore the violence. Battered woman was a phrase largely unknown. The frequency and dimensions of spousal abuse were not a part of public discussion. Perhaps, in part, that's why Hedda, Nussbaum chose to live with Steinberg's attacks. She later said that she hoped that he would change or the beatings would stop. The sense of shame or embarrassment that an abused woman feels may have also prevented her from seeking treatment. As a result, the situation became worse, a lot worse., I saw her wheeling the baby (Lisa) down the hall, a co-worker told reporters, And the baby had a cut lip, and Hedda had on sunglasses and a bandage everybody knew that she was a lady with a lot of trouble. By 1981, the abuse was so severe that she was fired from her job because of repeated absences due to her physical condition.



Hedda Nussbaum's second book: *Animals Build Amazing Homes* (Mark Gado)

Over the next few years, Hedda suffered through an ordeal that seems almost incredible in its viciousness and intensity. She sustained black eyes, broken bones, broken teeth, a fractured nose, burns, beatings and other acts which were detailed at length during Steinberg's murder trial., On November 2, 1987, when she was brought to the hospital, Dr. Neil Spiegel was the examining physician. She was a 45-year-old woman that appeared much older than her stated age, he said later. She suffered from anemia and was a hunchback due to calcium deficiency., Spiegel testified that her injuries consisted of cuts on her lip, broken cheekbones, a broken nose, a large bruise on her right buttock, multiple broken ribs and ulcers on her legs so widespread that they were life threatening.

She was physically as badly injured as any battered woman I have ever seen-short of those who were killed, a social worker later told reporters.

Lisa



"Lisa Was So Full of Life" New York Post, November 4, 1987. (Mark Gado)

Lisa was born on May 14, 1981, at Beekman Downtown Hospital in lower Manhattan. She was the daughter of Michele Launders, 19, and a 20-year-old, college student unable to provide financial support. Opposed to having an abortion, Michele visited a physician sympathetic to her plight. He made arrangements for the baby to be adopted. Through the doctor, Michele met Joel Steinberg, introduced to her as a lawyer who handled many adoptions.

Steinberg told Michele that he would do his best to find a suitable couple for her baby and assured her that the child would have a good life, better than any she could ever hope to provide. This was important to Michele because even though she had chosen to relinquish her baby, she, wanted the child to have a comfortable life. When the baby was born, Joel Steinberg had Michele sign some documents. That was the last day Michele saw her baby alive.

But Steinberg simply took the baby home and kept her. No legal adoption was arranged. She grew up with Steinberg as her father and Hedda Nussbaum as her mother. Some law enforcement officials

speculated that Steinberg avoided the usual adoption procedures because he wanted to bypass the legally mandated in-house visit after a child has been adopted. A legal adoption would also have required an inquiry into his domestic life including an interview with Hedda Nussbaum. Meanwhile, Michele was told that a well-to-do attorney on Manhattans Upper East Side had become the adoptive parent. She went on with her life, convinced that Lisa had a safe and wonderful future.

Lisa attended New York City Public School 41. Teachers remembered her well. She had a way with adults that did not go unnoticed. She was the most wonderful, loving creature, who could talk to you like an adult, which was an extraordinary gift, said a family friend.

It is unclear when the abuse of Lisa began. Some tenants at 14 W. 10th Street claimed they called the police many times to report Steinbergs suspected abuse of Hedda. But the child abuse allegations seem not to have begun until about 1983 when one of Heddass colleagues called a hot line to report suspected abuse of Lisa. Another tenant called the hot line because she felt that if Hedda was being beaten, Lisa was also in jeopardy. Suzanne Trazoff of the Human Resources Administration told a reporter that the complaints were investigated in 1984 which included a visit to the Steinberg residence -- but no signs of child abuse were found.

Teachers at P.S. 41, where Lisa attended the first grade, did see a few bruises on her face. When Elliot Koreman, the school principal, asked about the injuries, Steinberg and Nussbaum said that Lisa was struck by her 16-month-old brother, Mitchell., Dont you think weve tortured ourselves asking if she exhibited anything in school? Koreman later told reporters. Things like this happen, he said, We have no foolproof method of detecting them. Were doing the best we can. But inside her home, Lisa must have been suffering terribly.

Doctors and nurses at St. Vincents were appalled when they examined Lisa on the morning of November 2, 1987. She had cuts on both of her arms, legs, abdomen, stomach and head. Her feet and ankles were covered with a crust of black dirt and grime. Lisas long, once-beautiful hair was a twisted, matted mess and had not been washed for quite some time. Under her tangled mane, doctors discovered a severe, fresh bruise on her forehead. When they turned Lisa over on her belly, they found one large, unusual bruise near the center of her lower back. Her upper back was covered with both old and new bruises, red, black, and blue in color. Both calves had yellowish-brown marks, apparently from old injuries. She had bruising and trauma marks on her buttocks. How precisely she obtained these injuries remained unclear since Lisa never regained consciousness. Her brain was hemorrhaging and she was already near death.

Lisa had been prone on the bathroom floor for hours, unattended, while Joel Steinberg, fully aware that she was injured, went out to meet friends. Hedda stayed home alone with Mitchell, the 18-month-old baby, and waited. Never did she lift up the telephone to call for an ambulance, a friend, a neighbor, or anyone else., Joel said he would take care of her, he would get her up when he got back, Hedda later told the court through her tears, and I didnt want to show disloyalty or distrust to him, so I didnt call.

She Won't Be An Olympic Athlete

In 1986, there were 67,750 reported child abuse cases in New York. At least 42 died. The Steinberg case, however,



Lisa Steinberg holding baby Mitchell

seemed different from the very start. A story of a little girl who may have been beaten to death by a Manhattan attorney and a book editor, two people who are not normally associated with such an event, was front-page material. Moreover, Hedda Nussbaums shocking physical state underscored the violence within the Steinberg household. But it was Steinbergs unusual behavior both before and after Lisa was brought to the hospital that stoked reporters interest.

He made bizarre comments to doctors and investigators and seemed indifferent to the storm that was building around him. When police questioned Steinberg about fresh cuts on his knuckles, he said he didnt know he had them and offered no further explanation., On the night Lisa was brought to the emergency room, Dr. Patrick Kilhenny, a resident, told him that Lisa was in serious condition and would suffer permanent damage even if she survived. Well, what youre saying is that shes not going to be an Olympic athlete, but shell survive, Steinberg replied. When the doctor testified at the trial the following year, he said he remembered seeing a strange smile on Steinbergs face at the time. He smiled. It was a big grin, Kilhenny recounted.

Earlier, a nurse had confronted Steinberg and had told him that his daughter was brain dead. Is there anything else wrong with her? Steinberg replied. He then told the emergency staff that he had to leave. I just couldnt believe anyone could act that cold and uncaring, the nurse said during the trial. Aaron Rosenthal, the assistant chief of detectives, told reporters the girls feet were so black, they had to scrape the dirt off them and she was suffering from lack of oxygen. Lisa was placed on life support, but clinically, she was already dead. She exhibited no brain activity and was unable to breathe unassisted. The prognosis was bleak.

Late that same morning, both Steinberg and Nussbaum were picked up by detectives at their filthy W. 10th Street apartment. They were charged with the attempted murder of Lisa. Police told reporters the apartment looked like it wasnt cleaned in about a year. Also found during a search of the apartment was \$25,000 in cash, drug paraphernalia and a small quantity of cocaine., The suspects were brought over to the 6th Pct. where both refused to give any statements. Steinberg requested his own lawyer. Theyre both very aware of their rights, Det. Rosenthal said later. Steinberg and Nussbaum were charged with first degree assault, attempted murder, and endangering the welfare of a child.

A debate ensued during the next few days as to who was entitled to act as Lisas legal guardian. Although declared brain dead, Lisa remained legally alive because she was on a respirator. Eventually, it was determined that the city was the childs guardian. On Thursday, November 6, Lisa was removed from life support at 8:40 a.m. and died immediately. The charges against Steinberg and Nussbaum were amended to murder. A grand jury began hearing testimony the same day. Mitchell, Lisas brother, who was found tied to a playpen in Steinbergs apartment, was turned over to the Human Resources Dept.

In the meantime, a defense lawyer was assigned to the case. But his representation lasted only one day. A young, brash Manhattan attorney had already been hired by the Nussbaum family to craft Heddas defense. His name was Barry Scheck, a brilliant lawyer who perhaps saw the case as a chance for prominence. In his very first press conference Scheck said Hedda would cooperate with prosecutors and testify before the grand jury. It was the first step in a long, difficult journey to convince prosecutors that Hedda Nussbaum was a victim too. She was a battered woman, assaulted by Steinberg for years, emotionally abused and subjugated to such a degree that she was incapable of thinking rationally. Her nose was shattered. Her ribs were broken. She had two black eyes. She was literally beaten senseless. How else to explain to a jury that a mother, alone in her



Barry Scheck,
Attorney (AP)

apartment, allowed her unconscious six-year-old daughter to lie on a cold bathroom floor for hours; unwilling or unable to make a simple phone call that might have saved her life?

The City That Couldn't Save A Little Girl

New York City's municipal government is larger than that of many nations. It is a sprawling, diverse, incomprehensible network of bureaucracy. Probably nowhere in the world is there a city that has as many commissions, departments, social service agencies, family courts, programs, committees all dedicated to the welfare of its citizens. Critics have said that the city is drowning under its own weight, so large is its governmental infrastructure. There are child protective groups of every shape and size, all focused on protecting children from abuse and exploitation. When Lisa died, all of it, the vast empire of social programs, the billions of dollars it spent every year and the thousands of people it employed, became the target of fierce public scrutiny and a torrent of angry criticism.



The West 10th Street neighborhood, New York's West Village (Mark Gado)

Tenants at 14 W. 10th Street and neighbors were particularly vociferous. Who protected this child? one said. The New York Times interviewed a producer for the television show 20/20 who lived on the first floor of the Steinbergs building. We reported it to all the proper agencies, she said. A neighbor who said she called a child-abuse hot line said responding investigators were unable to verify the charges. They came and did an investigation and said there was no evidence of child abuse, she said, You can imagine how we felt later when this woman walked in with another baby! She was referring to Mitchell; the 16-month-old baby who cops found tied to a playpen. William Grinker, then New York's commissioner of human resources, said that reports of child abuse at the Steinberg household were mishandled. I

don't think a government agency is responsible every time something goes wrong in a person's private life, he said. Though he wouldn't characterize the Steinberg case a success for his department, Grinker denied any responsibility for Lisa's death. But the public's outrage grew. Disclosure after disclosure revealed that the Steinbergs had come to the city's attention repeatedly. In each instance however, nothing was done. Child Protective Services personnel had visited the apartment a total of three times in 1983 and 1984. Each visit stemmed from reports of child abuse. The social workers were steadfast that there was no evidence of abuse. To make matters worse, it was soon discovered that the police had been to the Steinbergs apartment on October 6, just weeks before Lisa was killed, on an anonymous complaint of a family dispute. Hedda was found with several facial injuries, apparently inflicted during a fight with Joel. Hedda refused to press charges and the police left.

What should the neighbors do? *The Times* asked in a November 6 editorial. What police saw on Monday suggests that more neighbors should have called and called again, thus motivating more police response. But there was no simple or quick explanation for the bureaucratic bungling of the entire Steinberg-Nussbaum affair. A



The entrance to 14 W. 10th Street (Mark Gado)

defenseless woman was beaten, apparently for years with little or no intervention, and despite in-home visits from social workers and police, two kids were grossly mistreated. Now one of the children had suffered a grisly death.

One neighbor, who could have been speaking for an entire city, said to reporters: I ask myself what else I should have done. I dont know what else I could have done, short of dragging the kid out the door with a gun!

Trial By TV

On Friday, November 6, 1987, Joel Steinberg was indicted for second degree murder, first degree manslaughter, and endangering the welfare of a child. He was held without bail and placed under a suicide watch on Rikers Island, New Yorks sprawling detention center. District Attorney Robert Morgenthau said that Lisas death was one of the most tragic and horrible cases that weve seen. Morgenthau also blasted the states adoption procedures, which had placed Lisa in Nussbaums and Steinbergs care. If there had been a thorough background investigation, there was a chance he (Steinberg) would not have been granted custody, he said.



District Attorney
Robert
Morgenthau (AP)

In the months following the couples arrests there were hundreds of stories about Lisas life. The hostility toward the defendants was remarkable. Almost daily, the citys newspapers ran a story about Steinberg and Nussbaum. Repeated printings and airings of photos of a smiling and adorable Lisa generated sympathy for the little girl and antipathy for her parents.

But it wasnt just the photos or the press stories that fed the publics interest. In December 1987, television cameras were allowed into New Yorks courtrooms for the first time. It was an 18-month experiment in which the effects of live television coverage of trials would be measured and assessed. (This experiment led to the founding of Court TV in July 1991.) In March 1988, cameras were permitted at the sentencing of Robert Chambers, the man convicted of murdering Jennifer Levin in Central Park. That broadcast was a success there was little public outcry about cameras and ratings soared. Live coverage of a trial was the next step. The Steinberg case featured two social issues: spousal abuse and child abuse. Our obligation is to broadcast the testimony as much as possible, said one CBS executive. We felt the viewer deserved to see more of the testimony than we could put in one of our newscasts.

But then, as now, the most vociferous objections to television coverage came from lawyers and judges. Would lawyers play to the cameras? Would witnesses be intimidated knowing that their words were being broadcast? Even though their faces would not be shown, how would jurors react? Would television coverage increase the chances of jury tampering? As is true with all televised trials, applications for coverage were submitted to the judge. The judge could grant or reject them. The applications were approved and the stage was set. CNN, however, declined to broadcast the trial. A network executive opined that Nussbaum was not an exciting witness.

The trial opened October 25, 1988. In his opening statement, assistant district attorney Peter Casolaro said the evidence would show a graphic and grotesque chain of events and that Joel Steinberg beat Lisa so severely that he caused her death. Casolaro pointed to Steinberg and said, His story is inconsistent and impossible to reconcile with Lisa Steinbergs condition. Ira London, a top-flight criminal defense lawyer, replied that Nussbaums testimony will be the product of a delusional woman suffering from mental illness in a psychiatric hospital. He promised to provide witnesses who would testify to Nussbaums self-destructive romance with satanic cults, her sadomasochistic behavior outside the home

and her involvement with pornography.

But on October 26, 1988, Manhattans District Attorney Robert M. Morgenthau came to a pivotal and dramatic decision. Hedda Nussbaum would not be prosecuted in any way for the death of Lisa. The charges were dropped with the expectation she would be the star witness against her former lover, Joel Steinberg. Our investigation revealed that Miss Nussbaum was so physically and mentally incapacitated on the night of the murder, said prosecutor John McCusker, that she was not criminally responsible for Lisas death. The decision was greeted with immediate animosity and controversy. Some people felt that despite her condition, Nussbaum still could have made a phone call for help. But there could be no doubt that her attorney, Barry Scheck, had scored for his client and scored big time. Hedda, who stayed home rearranging Joels business files all night while a 6-year-old child lay on the floor forcing her to step over the body to go to the bathroom, would face no charges in her death.

What Killed Lisa?

For prosecutors to sustain a charge of murder, they would have to conclusively establish the cause of death. Although Lisa was brought into St. Vincents Hospital on the morning of November 2, 1987, in a fatal coma, she did not die officially until November 5 when she was removed from life support. After it was turned off, a doctor later said, there were a few minutes her heart continued to beat. How she came to be in that coma was essential to establish criminal liability.

Dr. Aglae Charlot, the medical examiner who performed Lisas autopsy wrote in her initial reports that the victims injuries were suggestive but not conclusive of trauma. During her testimony during the week of November 12, 1988, though, she stated that Lisa may have died from blunt trauma as the result of a homicide. Dr. Charlot was not the only doctor to come to that conclusion.

Dr. Mary Lell, the hospitals chief of pediatric neurology, testified that Lisas head injuries were consistent with a forceful blow and that the blow could have been a fist. She also ruled out the prospect of choking or poisoning as a cause of death. When the possibility of a fall was suggested, Dr. Lel was emphatic. Ive seen a number of children who have sustained that type of injurythe injury that would be sustained in that situation is completely different from the injury sustained by Lisa Steinberg.

But it was Dr. Douglas C. Miller of the New York University Medical Center who made the strongest impression on the jury. He said that Lisas brain damage was blunt head trauma, and nothing else. He made the comparison with the head blows suffered by professional boxers and who sometimes die from them. They never have their skulls fractured either, he said. The fatal blow would have to be one of sufficient force, a fact that worked against Steinberg because it was alleged that Hedda Nussbaum was in such a debilitated condition on the night of November 1, 1987, she simply did not have the energy to strike that hard. They (the blows) would have to have beena tremendous force, Miller said. In short, Lisas brain had been smashed into the walls of her skull.

Joel Talks

As the trial moved on, the specter of Hedda Nussabums testimony must have concerned Steinbergs attorney, Ira D. London, and terrified the defendant. Like most defendants, Steinberg would not testify so as not to supply the prosecution with another chance to re-tell the crime, but also to avoid making any incriminating statements. The jury would not be allowed to see an easily excited defendant who had a lot of explaining to do as to how a six-year-old girl wound up dead in his apartment while he went out to dinner with friends. Up until the week of November 25, Steinberg kept his comments to a

bare minimum. He gave no interviews and was not required to testify at pre-trial hearings or at the grand jury.

But he couldn't remain totally silent. Over the objections of his attorneys, Steinberg wrote a letter to *Newsday*, a Long Island newspaper that published it November 25. In this hand written letter, Steinberg said, My feelings for Lisa are almost inexpressible. She was the world to me. He went on to say that he loved her and missed her deeply. Just once, he wrote, look at her smile in one of those photographs and you will understand my feelings. My sadness and sense of loss are more than I can bear at times

Word had already reached Steinberg's defense team that Hedda was expected to testify within days. Steinberg wrote that he was concerned about what she would say. Regarding Hedda, he said, I must tell you that I loved her very much. I can only hope that she is capable of the truth in relating the events of Lisa's life and the events of Lisa's last night with us. Since her arrest, Hedda was hospitalized and then received psychiatric care at the Four Winds Hospital in Westchester County. She had no contact with Steinberg since November 2, 1987. It was part of her treatment regimen that she should have no communication with him whatsoever. For Steinberg, that meant he would be unable to manipulate her. With his freedom at stake and a prison term looming, he must have imagined that he could sway Hedda still. But he knew that he had a great deal to fear from an ex-lover turned state witness. Given what I have read, he continued, I fear Hedda may no longer be the person I knew and loved.,,,,,,

Steinberg was right on both counts: he had a lot to fear and Hedda was no longer a punching bag.

Hedda Takes the Stand

Long anticipated and feared by both the prosecution team and the defense, Hedda Nussbaum took the stand on the afternoon of December 1, 1988. Walking silently past the man she said abused and tortured her for years, she took her seat before a tense courtroom. Television audiences were particularly intrigued since in 1988, live trials on TV were not as common as they are today. Hedda's facial injuries were plainly visible and gave her a strange, almost artificial appearance.



Hedda Nussbaum
(AP)

The 46-year-old spoke slowly and deliberately. She was, on occasion, detached, evasive, forgetful and emotional. She seemed confused, often mixing dates and times. She had difficulty recalling certain details about Lisa's last days. But the overall tale Hedda told was a nightmare from start to finish. She said that Steinberg forced her to sleep in the bathtub or on the floor and she had to ask him for permission to eat and drink. Over the next few days, the jury recoiled at the mind-boggling story of the compulsive, masochistic relationship between Joel Steinberg and Hedda Nussbaum.

I was extremely attached to him, she explained. I thought he was the most wonderful person I had ever met, and I, well, basically, I worshipped him literally. I thought he had supernatural powers of ESP and healing, and a lot of godlike powers. But the abuse began, she said, almost immediately after they met. In early 1978, Steinberg struck Nussbaum in the eye and she required hospital treatment. That same year, she received ten black eyes from Steinberg. In 1981, he beat her so badly, Nussbaum had to go to Beekman Hospital on her own, and received surgery for a ruptured spleen. Doctors said that had she not come for treatment, she would have died. Over the next few years, she was beaten with a broomstick handle, a metal exercise bar, had her teeth knocked out several times, suffered a broken nose, had her hair pulled out, and her ribs broken. Prosecutors cited 31 specific instances of alleged

abuse by Steinberg. The judge allowed five of those incidents to be admitted.

Despite years of beatings and mistreatment, Hedda never succeeded in breaking away from Joel. He seemed to be extremely intelligent and bright, and I loved to listen to him talk, she said, what attracted me to him, his eyes, he had bright, shining eyes, alive eyes that I found very attractive. Although the beatings continued throughout their time together, Nussbaum couldnt leave Steinberg. I felt it was the worst thing in the world that could happen to me, she testified, that I couldnt survive without him, and I felt like I would kill myself if I was without him.

Nussbaum also told the court she had been using cocaine for about seven years. That varied quite a bit, she said, sometimes once in a couple of months, sometimes a few days in a row. Once every few weeks or something like that. It varied a lot. She testified that she freebased cocaine with Joel on many occasions and with friends as well.

On the second day of her testimony, Nussbaum told the jury about bizarre cults, child pornography and hypnotic powers. Nussbaum said that she had been hypnotized and began having sex with everyone in the world, practically. She said that at some point, she told doctors that she believed Lisa was sexually abused. I believe that I said that I had caused Lisa to be involved in some sort of sexual activity also, she told the court. According to Nussbaum, these incidents happened in front of many people: I believed I had many incidents of such things and that Lisa was involved to some extent also. When the prosecutor asked how old Lisa was at that time, her response was the only sound in the room.

About two and a half, she said.

Lisa's Last Night

Hedda Nussbaum was on the stand for seven days. Each day brought new and disturbing revelations about her torturous life under Steinbergs Svengali-like control. But it was her testimony concerning the night of November 1, 1987, that had the jurys undivided attention. Her description of Lisas death was critical to the prosecution and would determine Joel Steinbergs fate.

Nussbaum told the court that Steinberg awoke about 3 p.m. She said that she had not slept at all the night before. The first thing that I remember is that Joel asked both Lisa and myself if we had drunk enough water that day Joel always explained that I didnt drink enough water, she said. When she told him that she did not, Steinberg made Hedda and Lisa eat hot pepper. According to Hedda, Steinberg then stated that he was going out for dinner. A few minutes later, Lisa asked Hedda Do you think Daddy is going to take me with him tonight? Hedda said she replied to Lisa, Well, go in and ask him yourself!

Lisa went into the bedroom where Steinberg was getting dressed while Hedda went to the bathroom. According to Heddas testimony, Steinberg then walked into the bathroom holding Lisa, who was unconscious. Hedda said this occurred about 6:00 p.m. She was lying in his arms limp, she said, And I said What happened? He said, Whats the difference what happened? This is your child. Hasnt this gone far enough? They laid the unconscious girl on the bathroom floor while Hedda attempted to revive her. But Lisa was not responding., While she continued her efforts at first aid, Hedda said, Steinberg went to the bedroom and finished dressing for dinner with his friend.

At about 7:00 p.m., Steinberg was ready to leave. Hedda testified that he told her Relax. Go with her. Stay in harmony with her. Nussbaum stated that she was worried about Lisa but listened to Steinberg when he promised he would get her up when he got back. She told the court that Steinberg called the apartment while he was out and asked how Lisa was. While he was on the phone, Steinberg gave

Hedda permission to eat. She said she told him that Lisa was still lying on the bathroom floor unconscious. Hedda said that she still tried to revive her but nothing worked. I realized no matter what I did, it didnt seem to make much difference, she told the court, so I didnt need to work with her every minute. And I wanted to keep busy. So I rearranged Joels files.

When Steinberg returned later that evening, Hedda said, they freebased cocaine. Freebasing cocaine was the predecessor of crack and required special paraphernalia to burn the drug properly. You put the crystallized cocaine, the free base, in the top part of the pipe, Hedda testified, put water in the pipe and then you draw through a tube. Mr. Steinberg smoked for a couple of hours until the cocaine was, that we had, was gone and I smoked a small amount. Hedda testified that while they freebased Steinberg mentioned Lisa. One thing he said was about Lisa, I knocked her down and she didnt want to get up again. The staring business had gotten to be too much for her, she said. Joel had been saying that I was staring at him and that both of the children had been staring at him. Hedda said that they continued to smoke cocaine until about 4:00 a.m. When they checked on Lisa again, she was still unconscious. They picked her up and placed her on the bed while Hedda looked through a medical dictionary for advice.

Hedda said that Steinberg remained awake and read books to see if he could find out what was wrong with Lisa. At about 6:30 a.m., Hedda said, Steinberg called out for her and yelled, She stopped breathing! Hedda said she wanted to call 911 but Steinberg told her to wait a few minutes while he tried to give her CPR. When that failed, Steinberg finally told Hedda to call for help., By that time, Lisa had been on the cold, bathroom floor for nearly 12 hours.

I thought Joel would be able to restore her, Hedda told the court, I feel horrible. Its something Ill have to live with and regret for the rest of my life.

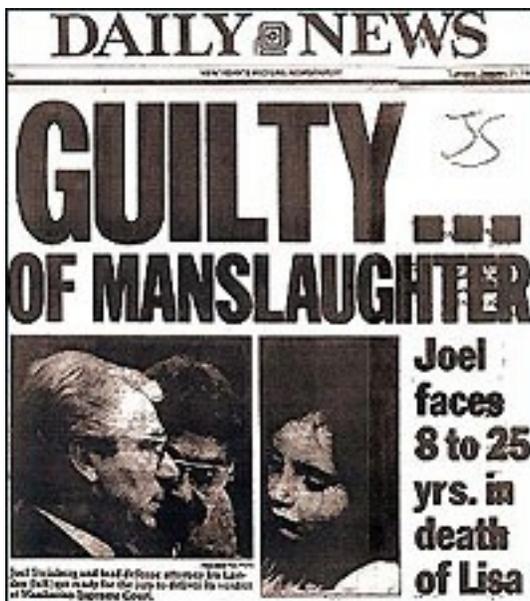
The Verdict Comes In

After the closing arguments, anticipation was high that Steinberg would be convicted on all counts., The jury received the case for deliberations on January 23, 1989 and for the next eight days; the jury contemplated the fate of Joel Steinberg while an entire city awaited the outcome., Jurors asked to

review testimony of several witnesses including Dr. Neil Spiegel who examined Hedda Nussbaum on the night of November 3, 1987. His description of Nussbaum, who he said resembled an old person who had cancer, was pivotal in determining if she was capable of inflicting the type of head trauma Lisa sustained.,

On January 30, the jury was done. Steinberg stood behind the defense table with his lawyer as the verdict was read at 6:40 p.m. On the second degree murder charge, he was found not guilty. On the first degree manslaughter charge, the verdict was guilty. Steinberg shook his head, shrugged his shoulders and appeared angry, but he remained silent. Steinberg had escaped the most serious charge but he still faced decades in prison. He was led out of the room and remanded into custody until sentencing. After three-months, 52 witnesses, more than 100 exhibits and 6,000 pages of testimony, the trial was over.

Jurors later commented on the eight days of deliberations.



"Guilty!" The Daily News, January 31, 1989 (Mark Gado)

Tempers flared as they struggled to reach a verdict. We all became absolutely positive that Hedda couldnt do it, the jury foreman told the *New York Times*, There was no way a person in her condition could strike this tremendous blow that killed Lisa. Although Nussbaum was the star witness and many considered her testimony devastating to Steinberg, the jury felt just the opposite. Heddas testimony we used practically not at all, another juror said. But there were disagreements as well. It was rough, another juror said, We were not near deadlock, but sometimes we were near exhaustion.

Not everyone was happy with the verdict. Michele Launders, Lisas birthmother, ran from the courtroom in tears. She attended the three-month trial every day and always sat directly behind Joel Steinberg., She once said that only a murder conviction could give Lisa justice and let her rest in peace. And no matter Steinbergs fate, there remained the lingering belief that Hedda Nussbaum had escaped culpability. Her attorney, Barry Scheck, said that after the verdict Hedda was upset and anxious and relieved that its all over.

For television viewers, the trial was a resounding success, as the ratings indicated. Heddas mangled face and battered appearance riveted viewers. Her testimony generated considerable public sympathy for Hedda and preserved her status as a victim. The way she looked and spoke was more dramatic than Meryl Streep, a Columbia professor told reporters. On the other hand, Steinberg, whose dark appearance on TV reinforced his guilt, suffered from the presence of cameras. It was unfortunate for Steinberg that he looks like evil, another professor said.

At his March 24, 1989, sentencing, Steinberg offered his version of, events. At no point did I ever strike them in any form, he said of the children, Those children were not locked in a house of horrors. He said that he and Lisa got along well and that he had a consistently joyous, happy relationship with her. He pointed out that his only crime was an error of judgment. As for his prosecution, Steinberg claimed that he was being treated unfairly. Its not like a defendant who stands before you and perpetrates a crime on an outside victim, he said, Im the loss, the victim.



Joel Steinberg,
prison photo ID

Judge Harold Rothwax disagreed and sentenced him to 8 1/3 to 25 years, the maximum.

"It's Very Painful!"

In January 2002, Joel Steinberg testified at a parole hearing in Southport Correctional Facility in New York. His prior release hearing, which was denied, was on February 8, 2000. Although Judge Rothwaxs recommendation was against Steinbergs parole, he is still entitled to apply for release, which can be granted at anytime after a hearing and the state parole boards approval.

In his 2002 hearing, Steinberg maintained that his conviction was based solely on his failure to obtain medical aid for Lisa. He pointed out that Lisa had no external injuries and said that fact was clearly stated by the medical examiner. There are no external injuries and she (the medical examiner) says there is no trauma to the brain, Steinberg said. Thats not even equivocal, he continued, the hospital reports from St. Vincents clearly show that they examined Lisa upon entry.

Steinberg was asked by parole board commission Marietta Gailor for his version of the crime. I have more responsibility in my own heart and my own soul personally its very easy to realize how many things I did wrong and shouldnt have done or should have done, he said. Steinberg went on to describe his relationship with Lisa and Mitchell and said I was extremely close to and described as a doting parent, totally involved father who maintained a friendship with these children and personally took

them for continual medical care and educational care and spent all my time with them. This is a huge loss its very painful.

Despite his claims of dedication to Lisa and Mitchell, Steinberg's 2002 request for parole was denied. During the course of the instant offense, the parole commissioner stated, a vulnerable child who was in your custody lost her life due to your failure to get medical help for her in a timely manner.

Following Joel Steinberg's 2004 parole hearing, he was released from prison after serving 16 years of a maximum 25-year sentence. An uproar ensued.

Hedda Nussbaum remained under psychiatric treatment for years after the trial and slowly got her life back on track. Eventually, she joined a support group in Westchester County where today she is a counselor for battered women. She has also undergone several surgical procedures to fix broken bones in her nose and her cheeks and to repair damage to her eyes. She was interviewed in April 2002 for a newspaper article in which she said that although she remains traumatized by her experience, she feels she must move on. They're my children and they'll always be my children, she told reporter Corey Kilgannon, But I can't live in the past. I have to live my life now.

In October 1999, Michele Launders, Lisa's birth mother, accepted a \$985,000 settlement in the litigation she brought against several New York city agencies that she said failed to protect her daughter. Her lawyer told reporters, that Michele was relieved it was over and it gives her closure. Although the {New York Times} once reported that Steinberg had \$3 million at the time of his arrest, Launders was unable to collect anything from him since he had no provable assets in later years.,

Lisa is buried in the scenic Gates of Heaven cemetery in Valhalla, New York, a suburb about forty miles north of Manhattan., Her grave rests near a commanding oak tree whose branches seem to hover over it like the protecting arms of a mother she never knew in her brief life. The flat, gray tombstone that marks her final resting place is a scant 18 by 24, dimensions that are somehow too small for the magnitude and manner of her death., She is remembered well in New York, the smiling face of a little girl who no one could save from inexplicable cruelty.

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COMMENTS

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[Rebecca Wolfe](#) · [ECPI](#)

after reading this story after all these years again, , Makes me sick and hurt inside for all the little ones who are abused. I cry inside. I hope God's kingdom comes soon.

[Reply](#) · [12](#) · [Like](#) · [October 12, 2011 at 12:13pm](#)



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[Mary Pat](#) · [Top Commenter](#)

Yes, Rebecca, I remember the whole story, I also read Joyce Johnson's book. There is

something wrong with a society that allows people like Joel to be walking around among us. IMO, he should have been removed permanently from our midst. And I give NO measure to Hedda, she was in on it from the beginning. A sick, twisted woman with a sick twisted man. At least baby Travis got out of that mess alive, but what a shame that Lisa had to die.

[Reply](#) · [5](#) · [Like](#) · November 4, 2011 at 6:55am



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[Tee Elle](#)

Society as a whole has obvious problems, but according to this article, concerned citizens/neighbours contacted the proper authorities. The authorities however failed to respond appropriately, for whatever reason. In case you did not open your mind to this possibility; Hedda was severely abused with equally severe mental health issues. I'm so relieved to know that certain segments of "society" are without fault and fit into the media's portrayal of "norm". Whew, where would we be without the above-reproach population. Sarcasm.

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · June 9 at 7:26pm



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[Mary Pat](#) · Top Commenter

Normal people find the steinbergs disgusting people as sick as they are defend them failure to protect the children is worse than executing those who abuse and. Kill the children jmo

[Reply](#) · [1](#) · [Like](#) · June 9 at 7:52pm



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[Mary Pat](#) · Top Commenter

Joel Steinberg served his time and is now out of jail, in my mind his actions AND the actions of Hedda were execution worthy. I'd like to track down....oh never mind.

[Reply](#) · [8](#) · [Like](#) · November 4, 2011 at 6:52am



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[Denise D'Andria](#) · Top Commenter

He should of never been let out of prision. Even though Hedda was a battered woman, she should of been held accountable for Lisa's death as well.

[Reply](#) · [4](#) · [Like](#) · April 6 at 7:21am



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[Penny Miller](#) · [Bristol Community College](#)

Denise D'Andria I agree with you completely I along with the rest of the country watched the first ever televised trial of this monster, and were just outraged at the things we heard, at his not guilty murder verdict, and wept for Lisa.....I later bought the book titled "The killing of Lisa Steinberg" and cried as I read and when I finished I had to throw it out.....When I found out he was released after serving 9 of a possible 25 years....I just wanted to scream at a system that could allow this monster not pay

[Reply](#) · [2](#) · [Like](#) · June 15 at 10:46am



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[Patty Miller Masters](#)

He served 16 years...

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · July 24 at 12:57am

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[Adeela Leghari](#)

the woman was a nutso and the guy was a masochist cannibal.....both deserve to die.

[Reply](#) · [8](#) · [Like](#) · [November 4, 2011 at 9:48am](#)



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[Adeela Leghari](#)

there need to be strict laws whereby sadists, masochists, cannibals, rapists and murderers need to be executed

[Reply](#) · [5](#) · [Like](#) · November 5, 2011 at 1:07am



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[Denniene Wakeman Townsend](#) · Works at [Essendon Keilor College](#)

Why on earth do people like these two have/adopt children only to do this to them? Goes beyond the pale of any reasonable logic!

[Reply](#) · [6](#) · [Like](#) · [October 30, 2011 at 10:16pm](#)



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[Rochelle Castillo](#) · [Manager](#) at [IHOP](#)

Wow....that is horrendous. I looked up this story bcuz I watched an episode of Law & Order that had a disclaimer at the end. Makes me pray even harder.

[Reply](#) · [4](#) · [Like](#) · [October 26, 2011 at 9:29pm](#)



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[Heather Hutchison](#) · [Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry](#)

That is how i heard about it. It is awful how many children out there are living in this hell to this day. So sad!

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · [November 19, 2011 at 10:35pm](#)



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[Amy Wilken-Brown](#)

This makes me sick! Makes me think about all the other kids going through this...SAD :(

[Reply](#) · [3](#) · [Like](#) · [November 4, 2011 at 3:00pm](#)



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[Carole Chema](#) · [University of Eastern Africa, Baraton](#)

Just watched a series of Law and Order which had a similar story to Lisa's and I decided to research the story myself and found this article. Very heartbreaking to learn that such levels of abuse a meted out to children and spouses everyday around the world.

[Reply](#) · [1](#) · [Like](#) · [December 21, 2011 at 11:13am](#)



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[Sandi Sandra Neal Watterson](#)

How does a monster like this see the light of day?

[Reply](#) · [4](#) · [Like](#) · [October 8, 2011 at 7:32pm](#)



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[Becky Davidson](#) · [UNIVERSITY CINCINNATI](#)

I don't either. But Lisa has seen the light of heaven, and she is at peace.

[Reply](#) · [1](#) · [Like](#) · [February 7 at 11:27am](#)



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[Charlotte Hartley](#) · [Centralia, Illinois](#)

I would like to see a story about both of them now - not an interview, I don't want to hear what they have to say - I just want to know if they in any way are not suffering for what they did. I'd like to track down... oh, never mind.

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · [January 24 at 1:51pm](#)



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[Denise D'Andria](#) · [Top Commenter](#)

He will never admit to anything, I bet he sleeps well at night, Hopefully, he will get wants coming to him.

[Reply](#) · [1](#) · [Like](#) · [April 6 at 7:23am](#)



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[Melinda Martinez Foster](#)

There is a Law & Order episode that used this story for one of their episodes. This is so sad, may she be resting in peace.

[Reply](#) · [1](#) · [Like](#) · [November 15, 2011 at 10:13am](#)



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[Ashley Knuth](#)

I was born in 87 this is absolutely horrible and the piece of sh*t is walking the streets??? I have children and I don't see how a person could do such things to a child! Let's hope he never crosses paths with me! What a sorry s.o.b. that baby is at peace now and I hope it haunts that man for the rest of his miserable pathetic excuse of an existence

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · [January 25 at 10:46pm](#)



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[Becky Davidson](#) · [UNIVERSITY CINCINNATI](#)

Becky Davidson Yes, Joel Steinberg is walking the streets. I hope he never crosses paths with me, either. And he has no conscience, so I'm sure the monster sleeps well at night. but, his time will come, when he goes down the greasy slide (that's a saying I got from my father).

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · [February 7 at 11:21am](#)



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[Barbara Hecht-Polk](#)

I will always remember Lisa. When it happened my own were just little boys and I couldn't imagine ever doing something so evil. Beautiful Lisa RIP princess.

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[Ryou Rei](#) · Top Commenter

some people don't deserve to have kids.

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[Becky Davidson](#) · [UNIVERSITY CINCINNATI](#)

No, they don't.

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