

# In Depth



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Susan Nelson was in a coma for two weeks and wasn't expected to live after she was shot in the head in 1993. A friend she was having dinner with was killed.

## RECOVERY

# Ex-Arlington woman writes about her will to survive shooting

■ Susan Nelson published 'The Only Light I Saw Was in Galveston' to share the story of her struggles and successes.

BY PATRICK M. WALKER  
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### ARLINGTON

People say I'm a "MIRACLE." They say I must have a purpose. Don't we all have a purpose? I think we do. I also think, it's quite possible, that I'm literally just too darn hardheaded to die.

One minute, Susan Nelson was 29, attractive, single, loving life and dreaming big — of moving

to New York and becoming a soap opera star. She even had a *Readers Digest* article on how to do it.

The next, she seemed to be driving in a strange, dark place when her car broke down. Up ahead she noticed a house with lights, so she made her way there to ask for help. But those who answered the door were malevolent beings — witches, she thought. She guessed they intended to hold her captive and then sell her.

It was April 4, 1993, a day that started with Nelson's Sunday ritual of sleeping in, then sipping coffee while reading the paper on her balcony. By

mid-afternoon she was at the northeast Arlington apartment of Gary Rutherford, a man she was becoming close friends with, though there was no romantic connection, at least not yet.

Around 10:30 p.m., Rutherford, 30, the manager of a Tex-Mex restaurant, lay dying on his living room floor. Doctors thought Nelson had no more than a few hours left herself. "Her chances of survival are felt to be nil," her surgeons said.

The pair had been shot after being robbed by an emotionally troubled young man who a few months before had

showed up at the restaurant and asked for work. Jason Ray Dean, then 19, had spent the second decade of his life bouncing back and forth between his father in Indianapolis and his mother in Arlington. Less than a month earlier, he had been arrested by Grand Prairie police on suspicion of trying to write a bad check to pay for jewelry at a Wal-Mart.

About two weeks before the shooting, after moving out of his mother and stepfather's home following an argument over \$1,200 in bad checks, Dean began staying at Rutherford's apartment,

within easy walking distance of the eatery. It would become a fatal gesture of compassion on the part of Rutherford, who a fellow manager would later tell the *Star-Telegram* had brought Dean back several times after he stopped showing up for work.

Dean had joined Rutherford and Nelson that Sunday evening for a home-cooked dinner, a recipe from Rutherford's native Australia that he had wanted Nelson to try. After the dishes had been cleared away and Rutherford and Nelson sat on the couch talking, Dean retrieved Rutherford's hidden-away 9mm semi-automatic handgun, demanded their possessions, ignored their pleadings and, when they stood to make a dash for the patio door, shot them both from behind.

For Nelson, now 52 and a longtime Austin resident, death would have spared her from the on-and-off nightmare her life would become in those first weeks, months and years after the shooting. The bullet left what surgeons described as a

"blast deformity in the left occipital bone." Medical images of her brain showed traces of bullet fragments like "rays of the sun," her mother told the *Star-Telegram* about four weeks after the shooting.

That Nelson lived to tell the tale is by all accounts a medical miracle. That she chose to tell it in a book she published last year, *The Only Light I Saw Was in Galveston*, is proof that not even a bullet to the brain could kill her spirit or her sense of humor, though it did permanent damage to other parts of her. She was also shot in the left shoulder and right hand, the latter likely a defensive wound.

"I hope maybe the book can help other people find their own light," Nelson, an avid Texas Rangers fan, said during a recent visit to Globe Life Park in Arlington, where her former employer David D'Aquin owns the custom jewelry shop Baseball Diamonds. (The Rangers, for whom Nelson worked for a time, helped with a fundraiser for her medical expenses that was held in

SEE 1993 SHOOTING, 6A

# UT honors victims on 50th anniversary of tower shooting

BY MATTHEW WATKINS  
The Texas Tribune

In the sweltering heat Monday, hundreds of mourners, survivors and University of Texas at Austin students gathered in the shadow of the UT Tower to honor the 16 people killed and dozens wounded during Charles Whitman's shooting rampage exactly 50 years earlier.

But no one mentioned Whitman's name during the somber ceremony. And no one mentioned the coincidence that a state law was going into effect Monday allowing students, staff and visitors to bring their guns into public college campus buildings throughout Texas.

The event was the biggest sanctioned university remembrance since the shooting, which was a source of pain and shame for the school for many decades. But on Monday, university officials and survivors vowed to honor the people killed and the thousands of others affected by the shooting. The university unveiled a granite memorial listing the name of those who died.

"The new memorial and today's remembrance is long, long overdue," said UT-Austin President Greg Fenves.

"There will never be relief from the pain, and the scars you live with and scarred this great university," he added.

The ceremony began in

the school's south mall, where the first people were shot by Whitman from the tower's observation deck. Two trumpets played and a military color guard lowered the Texas and American flags to half-staff. Those flagpoles had been used to shield people on campus on Aug. 1, 1966, when the sniper, Whitman, was shooting.

The tower clock stopped at 11:48 a.m., the exact time the shooting started, and wasn't scheduled to start again for 24 hours. A bagpiper lead the crowd of people to a small pond north of the tower, where the new memorial sits.

Many victims and heroes from that day were in attendance, sitting in reserved chairs under a

white tent. Ramiro Martinez, one of the Austin police officers who shot and killed Whitman that day, sat near the front and received a standing ovation. So did Claire Wilson James, who was shot when she was pregnant. She lost her baby, and her boyfriend was murdered next to her that day.

James took the podium for a short speech, which focused on the lessons she hopes people learned from the shooting.

"I ask you to join me in taking a vow," she said, "to treasure the ones we walk with each moment.

"The violence that seized the campus began in the heart of one. Let this memorial remain — here in this campus and in our minds — as a reminder of the power we have at each moment to become a community of love, of reverence for life," she said.

Then the student body



AP archives

Charles Whitman was killed by Austin police.

presidents from 1966 and 2016 alternated reading the names of each person killed. After each name, the bell at the top of the tower tolled.

The law that went into effect Monday allows people who have concealed handgun licenses — generally only people who are over 21 — to carry guns into university buildings. But guns still won't

be allowed in sports arenas or certain research labs. Nearly every private school in Texas has opted out of the law.

U.S. Rep. Lloyd Doggett, D-Austin, reminded attendees of the rash of gun violence in America. In 1966, the term "mass shooting" didn't really exist, he said.

"This campus attack was unprecedented," he said. "I think it was as unexpected for us and our community and police department as if some flying saucer had landed atop the tower."

Now, he lamented, school shootings are frequent. But that doesn't make them any less terrible, he said.

"Let us resolve to never become callous to the loss we experienced here, or those [other] losses, and work together to prevent such wanton violence," Doggett said.