

Wild Child Speechless After Tortured Life



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They called her "Genie" -- a pseudonym to protect her privacy -- because since infancy her life had been bottled up in the horrors she experienced in one dimly lit room.

Alternately tethered to a potty seat or tied up in a sleeping bag in a mesh-sided crib under a metal cover, Genie had contact only with her abusive father during nearly 12 years of confinement.

After her emergence from that torture in 1970, the waiflike child became a cause celebre among researchers and do-gooders who wanted both to learn from her and save her. For doctors, her case is like that of the three children recently released from years of isolation in an Austrian cellar.

The world read with revulsion last week the details of Austrian Josef Fritzl's 24-year imprisonment and abuse of his daughter and three of the seven children he fathered with her.

The twists of Genie's life since her release -- a succession of breakthroughs, setbacks and manipulations at the hands of caregivers, researchers and foster homes -- offer some perspective on the path ahead for the severely stunted Austrian children, who communicate mostly in simple grunts and gestures, much like Genie did after her rescue.

During the four years she was under the intense care of specialists at Children's Hospital at UCLA, Genie progressed, but only briefly.

Though she eventually learned to speak, the team of credentialed doctors with millions of dollars in federal funding could not rescue Genie from a fate of abuse and exploitation.

Doctors argued over her care and affections. Finger-pointing, hateful allegations and a lawsuit followed. Even storytellers and filmmakers took sides, and ultimately, Genie regressed.

Today Genie is 51. She is again in psychological confinement as a ward of the state -- her sixth foster home. And again, she is speechless.

"We fumbled the ball," James Kent, a consulting psychologist for the Victims of Crime program in California and Genie's psychologist told ABCNEWS.com. "We had the opportunity to allow more of her potential. It was as much out of ignorance as disagreements."