



1991

"I felt guilty for years and years," says Widner (Nov. 5 in Humble, Texas).

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People
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The Texas Cheerleader Plot

"I WANT HER GONE!"



Driven by ambition, envy and a mother's love, Wanda Holloway would stop at nothing, not even a neighbor's murder, to help her daughter make the cheerleading squad. Here is the full story behind her bizarre crime.



THE TEXAS CHEERLEADER CASE

A DAUGHTER'S PAINFUL JOURNEY

WHEN HER MOM, **WANDA HOLLOWAY**, WAS ARRESTED IN A BIZARRE MURDER-FOR-HIRE PLOT, **SHANNA WIDNER'S** WORLD FELL APART. FINALLY, SHE SHARES HER STORY

By ANNE LANG AND KRISTEN MASCIA Photographs by MARY ELLEN MARK

Shanna Widner's stomach still churns at the memory. On a January day in 1991, as she practiced gymnastics in the garage of her family's Channelview, Texas, home, two police officers showed up looking for her mom, Wanda Holloway. Then 14 and in ninth grade, Shanna never forgot the way Holloway calmly set her jewelry on the kitchen table and followed the cops out the door. "Grandma is coming over," Holloway said. "I'll be back." The next day, Shanna listened in shock as a tearful Holloway—back home, out on bail—turned her world upside down with a single sentence: "She told me," Shanna says, "she'd been arrested for conspiring to kill Verna Heath."

The bizarre "Texas cheerleader" case—a real-life soap opera replete with high school rivalries, petty jealousy, big hair and a murder plot—gripped the nation. Holloway, then 36, made headlines as the crazed "Pom-Pom Mom" who cooked up a scheme—foiled before anyone was hurt—to hire a hit man to bump off the mother of Shanna's cheerleading rival Amber Heath. "As far as strange motives go, this is at the top," says Mike Anderson, former Harris County prosecutor. A spectacle from the outside, for Shanna, "it was horrible," she says. "I was hurt, angry and confused. It ruined my world." Speaking publicly for the first time, Shanna, now a 34-year-old teacher and mom of two in Humble, Texas, says the ordeal made high school a living hell. For years afterward she suffered depression and anxiety attacks; the mother she'd adored became like a stranger to her. Telling her story, she hopes, will help finally put the past in its place. "I'm tired," she says, "of it being this thing that consumes me."

It all began with a dream: Holloway's vision of her daughter as a cheerleader. It was a goal Holloway herself had never realized; her strict Baptist father had forbidden it. Buying Shanna her first cheerleader outfit at age 5, Holloway—divorced from Shanna and older brother Shane's father, Tony Harper—within a few

A Mother's Murderous Obsession

In 1991 Wanda Holloway's bizarre plot to have the mother of her daughter's cheerleading rival killed riveted the nation.

After giving up her cheerleading dreams, Shanna made the dance team her junior year.



Mother and daughter on a trip to New York City after appearing on *Donahue* in '91.



The case spawned headlines (right) and two TV movies, including one starring Holly Hunter (above).



Houston Chronicle

Thursday, Sept. 5, 1991

Parole could be two years away



Holloway given 15 years

Cheerleader mom's lawyers will appeal

By JOHN MARRAS
A 15-year prison sentence was handed down to Wanda Holloway, the mother of a cheerleader who was charged with conspiring to kill the mother of her daughter's rival, after she was found guilty of the crime.

7 decades of Kren rule end

Gorbachev's congress out

By [illegible]
The 70th anniversary of the founding of the Soviet Union was celebrated in Moscow with a series of events, including a concert and a parade.

Slow construction at

By [illegible]
The construction of the new bridge over the Houston Ship Channel is progressing slowly, with the completion date still uncertain.

years had enrolled her daughter in intensive gymnastics lessons while keeping a close eye on her neighbor Verna Heath's daughter Amber, a crack tumbler and beauty pageant contestant with a bedroom full of trophies. Shanna, meanwhile, came to hate cheerleading as her mother pushed her through grueling practices and injuries. "At some point it clicked: This isn't fun. But I was so close to my mom. She was my world,

and I wanted to please her."

She had her chance in the spring of 1990 at tryouts for the eighth-grade squad. Amber had edged out Shanna for a spot the previous year. This time, when Amber made the cut again and Shanna missed it, something in Holloway seemed to snap. "I could see my mom was agitated," Shanna says. "She felt Verna was trying to get in the way of my becoming a cheerleader." (Holloway and Verna and Amber Heath did not



"It's cathartic to get [my story] out," says Shanna (in her yard in Humble, Texas, Nov. 5).

“I WANT TO TELL AMBER AND VERA HEATH: I’M SORRY” —SHANNA WIDNER

respond to multiple requests to be interviewed for this article.)

Holloway’s arrest and the ensuing scandal—immortalized in two made-for-TV movies—rocked the blue-collar town. For Shanna, who as a little girl often played with Amber, the weeks and months that followed were a nightmare. Rocking herself to sleep at night, the churchgoing teen would sob, cursing God. “I kept thinking, ‘Why are you doing this to us? I hate you!’” Amazingly, Shanna and Amber continued to go to school together, despite Shanna’s father’s pleas. “I’d suggested that she switch schools,” says Harper, “but Wanda wouldn’t allow it.” While there was little outright cruelty, the stress of feeling all eyes on her took its toll in the form of stabbing stomach pains and body rashes. “I felt like I had a flashing neon sign on my forehead that said, ‘Pom-Pom Mom’s Daughter,’” says Shanna. In honors classes together, she and Amber avoided eye contact. Once, a schoolmate didn’t invite Shanna to a party because

Amber would be there. Another time, after making the dance team in 11th grade, Shanna was so mortified when the school brought in Verna, a dance instructor, to teach a routine, she quit. “It was like she dropped off the earth,” recalls Tishra Rodgers, 35, a friend to both girls. “She didn’t go to any after-school functions, she didn’t talk.” Adds Harper: “Shanna felt everybody loathed her, that they looked down their noses at her. She shut down.”

At home, throughout the ordeal—spanning Holloway’s trial and conviction, mistrial and plea deal that led to a six-month prison term—mother and daughter never spoke of the incident. Putting on a cheerful face for family, she’d lock herself in the bathroom, curl up in the shower and let the tears flow. “I felt,” she says, “very alone.”

Her mother’s troubles followed her to college, where once, upon hearing details of Holloway’s impending imprisonment, “I lost my mind,” Shanna says. “I was crying and yelling. I thought, ‘I can’t take this anymore.’”

Her life improved with work, love and children. Today, Shanna, who hopes to write a book about her experience, finds joy in the faces of her eighth-grade reading students and with her husband, Joe, a salesman, and two sons, ages 9 and 11, from her first marriage. When it comes to parenting, “I don’t push,” she says. “My oldest is into music, my youngest is into hunting and drawing. Whatever they want to do, we do.”

Her sons, unknowingly, have given her a gift: a way back to her mother. Living a short distance from Shanna’s house with her fourth husband, a businessman, Holloway is an attentive and caring grandma who picks up the boys from school every other day and has her daughter over for dinners of steak and potatoes. “We don’t have mother-daughter talks,” Shanna says. “But she’s very helpful, and we talk about the boys all the time.” They still never discuss the attempted murder. In the fall of 2010, after telling her boys about their grandma’s past, Shanna broached the taboo subject. “Why did you do it? What were you thinking?” she asked. Wanda Holloway was at a loss for words. “She really didn’t have any answers,” Shanna says. “She said, ‘It was a mistake. I was wrong. If I could take it back, I would. And I’m sorry.’” With a faraway look in her eyes, Shanna pauses, then says quietly, “So you just accept that, and move on.” ●

What Happened to Amber?

She could have lost her mother to a heinous crime, but Amber Heath never let scandal dampen her dreams. Before tryouts for the high school cheer squad, “She said, ‘Mom, I’m not going to let them stop me doing what I’ve wanted to do all my life,’” Verna Heath told PEOPLE in 1999. After serving as head twirler for the Baylor University marching band, she married and now lives with her husband and children near Dallas.