

## **Living with ‘The Unspeakable’**

By Victor Greto, The News Journal

Sunday, April 8, 2007

LYNDONVILLE, Vt. – She has a poet’s face: A mask of sorrow etched by an event more than nine years past.

And a gaze – brown eyes that can’t help but see through you, around you, but never really embrace you.

But when Denise Brown smiles, it all changes. She’s doing that more often these days.

The face of the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont, just 40 miles south of the Canadian border, is starting to smile, too. Most of the yards and the lots outside of businesses in this town of a few thousand have thawed into spring mud.

Despite the promise of the calendar, however, fields of ice and snow run thick along the roadside.

“I love the ruggedness, the remoteness,” says Denise, 47. “It helps peel away the nonessential crap. It makes you feel like you’ve accomplished something just getting through the winter.”

She smiles again.

Delaware and life with her husband, Ott, seem much more than 500 miles and a decade away.

Otho R. “Ott” Brown, born and raised on a farm in once-rural Bear, rose through state government to become deputy chief of staff for then-Gov. Mike Castle, and then headed the Delaware State Lottery before moving on to New York and then Connecticut.

He became one of four people murdered by a “troubled” employee nine years ago at the Connecticut State Lottery office in Newington, Conn.

One of the ways Denise has tried to move on is by writing a book, “The Unspeakable” (University of Delaware Press, \$26.95), a slim memoir thick with rage and pain, tempered by a tenuous, poetic understanding.

With the completion of the book, she wrote, she has cheated death. “He no longer rides at my elbow.”

She also has made it through another Vermont winter, six years after she moved here with her three children to get away from the pain of what she calls “the love song of violence we so willingly sing in our society.”

Even of Vermont, she says, “I’m getting the itch.” To move on.

“I think that writing the book helped her to reconcile her life,” says best friend Pat Jones, who lives in Delaware. “But it always will be a hole. Something she’s not ever going to get over.”

### **One man’s rage changes many lives**

Just before Ott Brown, 54, was murdered on Friday morning, March 6, 1998, he was running through a parking lot with other employees to get away from a man who already had killed three executives.

The man, Matthew Beck, had been released less than two weeks before from psychiatric treatment and given the OK to return to a workplace whose security people knew he was dangerous but had taken no precautions.

Ott, who ran the Connecticut Lottery Corp., probably knew he was one of Beck’s targets, so he veered away from the others and directed them to hide in a clutch of trees.

Ott backpedaled, raised his hands toward Beck, cried, “No, Matt!” lost a shoe, tripped and fell to the ground.

Beck stood over him.

“Please don’t kill me,” Ott told Beck. “I have a family.”

Ott raised an arm to block Beck.

Expressionless, Beck calmly reloaded his gun, said, “F--- you,” and fired two bullets into Ott. Still pointing his gun, Beck walked around Ott’s body, and fired again.

As police cars finally arrived, Beck put the gun to his temple and pulled the trigger, twice. Those last few seconds have scratched themselves indelibly into Denise’s face.

Their permanence belies any absolution. Or forgiveness.

They are naked lines, as unpoetic as a police report, witness statements, and the emptiness felt toward a meaningless death at the hands of a psychopath who felt cheated out of \$2,000.

“Only the vision of him in the parking lot holds on,” Denise wrote. “Those final moments, those three seconds, the last plea, the filthy curse. My husband’s arm rising up before his eyes. His blood seeping into a berth of stone. ... There is no safe wood for me to hide in, nowhere for me to run, no direction in which to turn my face away.”

### **The price of bureaucracy**

She has not yet turned away.

She will not talk about her husband’s murder.

Like a doubting Thomas, she repeatedly dreamed of Ott “standing before me, displaying his wounds, his hip, his temple, the back of his head.”

But she will talk about many other things.

She will talk about her contempt for a bureaucracy— state or corporate— incapable of taking responsibility.

“The medical community would have had to admit that sometimes when they play God, they don’t do it very well,” she wrote of the psychiatrist who allowed Beck to return to work. “The state bureaucracy in place for profitable decades would have had to open itself to genuine overhaul. A few people might have lost their jobs. The union wouldn’t have stood for it. And it was an election year.”

She will talk about how she cannot understand God or the universe in the same way she had before that morning.

“If the Lord God loves us and cares for us but doesn’t intervene in our lives,” she wrote, “then what the hell good is He?”

She will talk about seeing the ghost of her husband.

“But I wouldn’t want him to be a ghost,” she says. “I want him to be free.”

She will talk about how for more than a year after the event, white wine became her truest companion, and how she wanted to die, something she could only confess to a stranger at first.

She will talk about her and Ott’s three children— Alex, 19, who has Ott’s chocolate-brown eyes and is studying computer programming in college; and her twin 18-year-old daughters, Marion and Elizabeth, in their final months of high school.

“They’re the total opposite of me,” Denise says of her daughters. “They’re athletic and outgoing.”

When the girls go off to college this fall, she will be by herself. Almost.

She is dating, long distance, a man who lives in New York. Even after nearly a decade, it feels right that it’s long distance.

“I reached the point where I was strong enough to have a relationship that wasn’t based on need,” she says.

So, she will look into your eyes and smile and tell you that she loves life.

You believe her, because it makes sense that sorrow and hatred and joy and anger and love all can be true simultaneously.

Just like it makes sense that a person who writes a memoir about the inexpressible effects of a murder will not talk about the murder itself.

“I wanted to express what I couldn’t say at the time,” Denise says. “I wanted to craft a story that would last.”

In the book, based on a journal she kept for herself, she refuses to name any names but her husband’s. Its anonymity makes it universal, she says.

In one respect, it’s a common, American story: “It’s about what the effects of violence are.”

While she talks about American culture’s obsession with violence, she’s looking at you but seeing something else.

“I don’t think people get it.”

### **Prologue to a creative life**

She moved to Delaware just before first grade when her father, who sold insurance, got a job teaching in Sussex County’s Harrington school district.

Born in Babylon, Long Island, Denise Buel, her parents and brother first moved to Connecticut and Maine before settling on a 100-acre farm in Greenwood.

She grew up walking in the woods and playing outside. Inside, she occasionally watched the fuzzy reception of “Bewitched.”

But mainly she lived outside, or on the printed page, reading mostly science fiction, from Jules Verne to Robert Heinlein.

She was a good student at Milford High School, but hated it. Too cliquish, she says. “It was a place to leave.”

She “floundered,” wanting to be either a writer or an artist (drawing), but felt she could do neither very well.

Denise took accounting classes at the University of Delaware extension campus in Georgetown. “I thought I had to support myself,” she says.

But she soon changed her mind and, after graduating from UD in Newark with an English degree, she worked for less than a year in Montpelier, Vt., where her brother lived.

“It was all paperwork,” she says of her insurance firm job.

She returned to live with her parents in Greenwood. But then, at 24, she got a job at the state treasurer’s office in Dover. Pushing more papers.

But it was there where she met Ott Brown, 16 years older, and who had been married twice before.

Born in 1943 and raised in Bear, Ott stood 6 feet tall, and a lot of women had their eyes on him, Denise says.

“There was no way he was getting married again, he let me know,” she recalls.

But he kept calling her, driving for hours from his Bear home to hers in Sussex County, going to “Star Trek” movies or spending long summer days at Rehoboth Beach.

She debated their age difference, concluding that “he was simply the nicest, smartest guy I’d ever dated.”

She attended graduate school in Newark, moved in with a friend to be closer to school and to Ott. She earned a master's degree in English.

After they married in 1986— when Ott became then-Gov. Mike Castle's deputy chief of staff— Denise left school and began having children, Alex in 1987 and the twins in 1989.

Castle appointed Ott director of the state lottery in 1987. They moved to Bear, where, she says, she was the happiest she ever has been in her life.

### **Making imperfect work**

Nothing's perfect.

Like any other marriage, Denise and Ott's marriage had its ups and downs, temptations and lag times.

After the family moved from Delaware to Connecticut in between 1993 and 1994, the marriage continued apace until, toward the end, it became reinvigorated, and Denise felt happiness again.

She feels the stirrings of happiness in the rambling sprawl of the 1798 home at the edge of a small New England town in which she now lives

It's not perfect, either. It's not supposed to be, of course. It was a house to remove herself from the world, and to be closer to her father, who lives 30 miles away.

"Life had become all about the things you have," she says. "I don't need a remodeled kitchen or a Lexus in the driveway. It's a great place to have kids."

Two large dogs bark loudly in the backyard. The rooms are large and lined with eclectic furniture, books and plants.

She lives partly on an annuity she receives from Connecticut, half of Ott's salary when he was killed. Two years ago, she and others related to those killed settled out of court several lawsuits against the company, Beck's family and the doctor who allowed Beck to return to work.

Denise also teaches freshman English composition and memoir writing part time at Lyndon State College. She writes a food column for two monthly papers.

She calls an unheated area just off the dining room, where no other person or animal is allowed, her "meditation room."

It holds a small black stove, a glass tabletop held up by two short Greek columns, pictures of doleful female saints, including St. Jude, and a tapestry of a blond-haired, sad-eyed woman— a Guinevere longing for her absent Lancelot.

This is where she thinks.

She occasionally drives 18 miles to Westmore to sit on the beach at Lake Willoughby.

During the first week of spring, the lake is frozen solid, its surface channeled by snowmobile tracks.

"I love the beauty of snow," she says. "There's something about it, a comfort."

She first fell in love with snow and winter back when she was about 5 and her family spent time in Winterport, Me.

There, she held the hand of her first boyfriend, Marty, and sledged on small white slopes.

"I like to think I have faith that there is a rhyme or reason to things," she says. "An awful thing happened to me. But if I hadn't met Ott, I wouldn't have my three kids. I'm at a point where I can see the good."

Her mouth is not smiling when she says that. Only her eyes.

For now, it's enough.