

Paula Cooper in a police mugshot from 1985. Photograph: AP

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**A violent murder, a child on death row**

Paula Cooper was 15 when she murdered 77-year-old Ruth Pelke in her Indiana home, and was sentenced to death. But a campaign for her life came from an unexpected quarter

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**I**n the spring of 1985, Paula Cooper was 15 and on her lunch break at Lew Wallace high school in Gary, [Indiana](https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/indiana). She and her friends Karen and April decided to skip their afternoon classes and head over to Candyland Arcade around the corner. Paula had been at Lew Wallace for just a few weeks: it was her fourth high school. There were few constants in her life.

When she and her sister were nine and 12, their mother loaded them into the back seat of the car, closed the garage door and turned on the ignition. Her intention was to end their lives, the three of them together. In the event, she had a change of heart; they all survived. But that day had changed everything.

After that, Paula and her sister, Rhonda, had begun leaving home in the middle of the night; they earned a record with local authorities as “chronic runaways”. Their mother drank heavily and their father beat them hard at the slightest offence; the girls had pleaded with social workers and police officers, again and again, to remove them from their home. They were shuttled between emergency shelters and foster care – but every situation was temporary; every move ended with their return to that house. At 14 years old, Rhonda left for good. She had escaped to the home of her biological father in Illinois, leaving Paula without her one true ally. Alone with her parents, Paula became the sole focus of her father’s attention.

Karen was Paula’s best friend at school. At 16, Karen was a large girl, often out of breath; everyone called her Pooky, maybe because of her sweet face. She had a child, who was three, and he mostly stayed at home with her godmother. April, too, was pregnant – though she could still hide it.

The girls walked a few blocks down to the arcade, where they played games, talked to boys, bought sweets. Not much was happening; everyone was growing bored. April invited along a younger girl the others didn’t really know – Denise, who was 14, in her first year at the school – and together they walked to the house where April was living with her siblings, to sit on her porch and drink. Earlier in the week, the girls had robbed a neighbour – broken a window near the back door, slipped in, and come away with $90 – but they’d spent most of that money.

April mentioned an old woman who lived in the house just behind hers. “We could go over to her house,” she said. “Because she has a lot of money and jewellery and different things.”

The place the girls were talking about, the bright white house with the columns out front, was the home of Ruth Pelke. April told them she was a Bible teacher, an elderly white woman, and that, since her husband’s death, she had lived alone. The key to getting into her house, April said, was to ask about Bible study. “You could scare the lady with *this,*” she said to Paula, standing in the kitchen. She had pulled a butcher’s knife out of a drawer: the blade was wide and 30cm long. Paula slipped it inside her denim jacket.

While April waited at home, Paula, Karen and Denise crossed the alley behind the white house. They walked across the stretch of flat lawn and up the front steps. They passed between a pair of neatly tended ferns and crowded on to the porch. Karen rang the bell. After a long wait, Mrs Pelke opened the door.

Mrs Pelke had grown up doing farm and factory work, but she was an elegant woman, her hair set in bright white curls. The look in her eyes was gentle and steady. She was only slightly shorter than Paula, but she looked so much smaller. She was someone’s good grandmother, somebody’s soft mother.

“My auntie would like to know about Bible classes,” Karen said. “When you all hold them.”

Mrs Pelke opened the screen door, and the girls stepped across the threshold. They entered the living room, with its large fireplace. An ivy pattern covered the walls; the sofa was printed with leaves. Here and there hung small pictures of modest landscapes, a barn covered in snow. Paula carefully set her jacket down on the sofa.

They trailed the old woman into the dining room, where there was a large table, a pump organ and a writing desk. Mrs Pelke pulled a pen and pad out of the desk drawer: she would write down all they needed to know. She leaned over – and Paula came up from behind and knocked her down.

Mrs Pelke landed seated on the carpet, legs splayed in front of her, the tips of her thick soled shoes pointed toward the ceiling. Just within reach, on the table, was a glass paperweight. Paula picked it up and brought it down hard on the lady’s head.

For a moment, nothing moved. And then a rush of blood sprang from the woman’s head. She did not stir. Paula looked down at her. She had never before laid someone so low.

Paula would remember what came next like this: that suddenly, there on the tabletop, was the knife, within reach. And she reached for it.

Her movements were exaggerated now. She slashed at the lady, shouting: “Where’s the money, bitch?” She shouted it again, then again, slashing at the woman’s dress, growing more determined, cutting through skin. She climbed on top of her. From this vantage point, peering down at the lady’s face, she saw Mrs Pelke’s earrings, like silver buttons, and those dark freckles that old people get on their skin. A key deep inside Paula turned and caught, and she was set in motion. She stabbed the woman in her chest. Her hand came down more than 30 times before she stopped, leaving the blade in Mrs Pelke’s stomach.

Ruth Pelke was pinned like a specimen to her dining-room floor. She would soon be dead. The young girls were circling, stalking, moving through the house, overturning photos of Mrs Pelke’s grandkids and touching and tossing aside books and ornaments, family things. They took the key to her Plymouth, and a total of $10. These were children, like the hundreds of others who had passed through her house. That was why she had let them in.

**B**ob Pelke, Ruth’s stepson, was the one to discover her body. After several unanswered calls, he had opened the door with the spare key. Minutes later, detectives began streaming in, and the white house on Adams Street became a public place. Bob stood outside, aimless, as cars continued to pull up – until someone told him there was nothing more for him to do, that they were sealing Ruth’s home.

The next day, Ruth’s murder was on the front pages of the county’s major papers: “Bible teacher, 77, murdered in her home” was the lead story of the Gary Post-Tribune; “‘Someone special’ killed”read the Times of Northwest Indiana. They wrote about the event as a robbery. Ruth’s grandson, Bill Pelke, was a steelworker. For 20 years he had operated a crane high above a warehouse of the Bethlehem Steel mill, from where a few thousand tonnes of fresh steel were shipped out every day. Alone at home, before his shift, he spread the papers across his kitchen table and clipped out each article, one by one: to memorialise what was happening, and try to extract from it some kind of sense.

Within days, all four suspects were in custody, and any chance of making sense of this crime or its motives was wiped out. They were girls, all of them – 14, 15 and 16 years old.

The Lake County prosecutor, Jack Crawford, and his team visited Bob to discuss what the “pursuit of justice” might look like for the family. Crawford had been elected on a “tough on crime” platform. Indiana was one of 37 death-penalty states and a state that allowed for the execution of someone under 18. (At the time, the minimum age for the death sentence in Indiana was 10 years old.) Crawford was determined that the girls face the ultimate punishment – and he wanted the Pelkes’ blessing. No prosecutor or politician wanted to see the victim’s family complain in public later on. So he sat in Bob’s living room, and he did what he usually did in a murder case: he let the family speak for a while about their anger, their sadness, their immediate needs. Then he talked about “justice” and “process”, and laid out their options. And, as always, he finished by saying: “Is there anyone here who is adamantly against my decision to seek the death sentence for the killer? I want to hear about it *now.*” To a person, they were OK with going for death. In his experience – this was his ninth capital case – the victim’s family members always signed off.



Jack Crawford, the Lake County prosecutor. Photograph: Lake Country prosecutor’s office

Beginning in the late 1960s, a phrase came to dominate American politics: “Law and order”. It was a weapon of Richard Nixon during the 1968 presidential campaign and was wielded by Ronald Reagan throughout his administration. The term was tied to the idea that many of the country’s problems stemmed from “soft” enforcement of the laws, at every level of the system. Democrats and Republicans alike began vying to be seen as “tough on crime” by voters, and that attitude trickled down to prosecutors around the country. The number of prisoners on death row across the country continued to climb.

Crawford had always been attuned to the way justice was shaped by public opinion. Over the course of what would be a decade as Lake County prosecutor (the Pelke case came in his seventh year), he would push for the death sentence 22 times and would win 17 – one of the highest death-penalty conviction rates of a county prosecutor in Indiana history. But he was sensitive to his standing with Black voters: he could imagine the political blowback of pursuing capital punishment for four Black girls. And so he consulted some of the county’s Black ministers whom he had made a point of meeting during his run for prosecutor, to gauge the mood of the community. No one Crawford spoke with had an objection. The act was too violent, and the victim a devout Christian woman, a Bible teacher – that fact alone seemed to transcend race, to evoke the need for an Old Testament form of justice.

He called a press conference. That Friday afternoon, Crawford sat behind his large desk, a set of scales – his personal “scales of justice” – to his left, and about 20 of his favoured reporters and TV journalists in attendance. He confirmed that the suspects in custody were teenagers, and that he had petitioned to have all four tried in adult court. But his most important announcement was that the state would pursue the death penalty for as many of the girls as possible. This, Crawford believed, would send a message: for certain crimes, even a young person must pay the highest price.

After the arrests, Bob had returned to his mother’s house. With everything photographed and catalogued by detectives, he was permitted to step inside. His niece joined him there. They were determined to restore order. Bill, his son, arrived to check on them between shifts at the steel mill.

Like his father, Bill was sturdy and tall, a lifelong blue-collar worker. But his appearance – a thick, bohemian head of hair and a full beard – hinted at the divide between him and his conservative Baptist family. Bill had once been a man with direction. He had studied hard and enrolled at a fundamentalist Baptist college with plans of becoming a pastor. And then he dropped out: he quickly discovered that he had no particular spiritual conviction. By the time of his grandmother’s death, he was a man with bad credit, one divorce, three estranged children and two disappointed parents. Out of all his family, his grandmother had never judged him. She had never turned away from him.

At Adams Street, Bill found his family cleaning blood off the walls and scrubbing the floor. He felt unable to help. He was nearly 40 and had been wounded three times in Vietnam – some days he could feel the shrapnel still embedded in his back. But he could not wipe his grandmother’s blood off the floorboards.

**I**n the months to come, Karen, April and Denise each received lengthy prison sentences for their role in the home invasion. Paula’s turn for sentencing came in July 1986. The county courthouse had rarely been so crowded. Reporters from Indiana papers and international news agencies packed the benches of courtroom 3 for one reason: the chances were high that a teenage girl would be sentenced to death. At the plaintiff’s table sat the deputy prosecutor who would be arguing the case, and Crawford beside him. Behind them were members of the Pelke family.

Across the aisle, the public defender awaited the arrival of his client. On the defence side were Paula’s sister, Rhonda, and their grandfather Abraham, who had long felt overwhelmed by the question of how to help the Cooper girls. Paula’s parents were nowhere to be found: they had moved out of state shortly after her arrest.

Bill and his girlfriend, Judy, were the last to show up. He was a conspicuous figure as he rushed through the throng of TV crews in the hallway and down the courtroom aisle. Bill grabbed the first seats he saw, not realising he was sitting with the defence. He had taken time off work to be here today. His father had told the family that the judge would probably sentence the Cooper girl to death, and if that happened, Bill wanted to be in the room for it. He told himself that he did not wish anyone dead, but he wanted the state to hand down the maximum penalty for the taking of his grandmother’s life. The state had made the Pelkes feel that anything less would be a defeat.

At 10am, Paula was led into the courtroom by a female officer. All eyes were on her, hands cuffed in front, her short hair a puff of dark curls. As she entered, Paula was smiling – laughing, actually – as if in response to something the officer had said. As she took her place beside her attorney, Bill watched, disgusted. He thought, *You won’t be smiling when this day is over.*

Witnesses testified for the prosecution: forensic specialists, corrections officers, girls who had seen Paula driving Mrs Pelke’s stolen car. But most memorable was Bob Pelke, who made a clear plea on behalf of the family – a plea for vengeance. “Do what has to be done,” he said, “annihilate the criminals, so that decent people can enjoy the life that God has given them.” A lesser sentence for Paula would be “immoral, unbiblical, unproductive, a travesty of justice and a disregard to the rights of victims”.



Ruth Pelke

Paula’s sister Rhonda took the stand for the defence. She was only 19, and made sure to dress in her most conservative clothes: she wanted badly for her words to have weight. When asked to describe the frequent beatings by Paula’s father, she replied: “With extension cords, with all our clothes off.” And when asked how, in 1979, their mother had convinced them to end their lives together in the garage, Rhonda said: “By telling us that was the best thing for us, and we don’t have anything here.”

But the prosecution expressed no interest in the role that childhood abuse had played in the shaping of Paula Cooper. In his closing argument, the deputy prosecutor stated: “Cold-blooded murderers should be put to death to atone for crimes they have committed.” The people of Indiana, he said, “shall not be bullied into believing that retribution is evil”.

Finally, Paula had her chance to speak. She rose for her statement. If she had been coached by her counsel, there was scant evidence of it. She was self-pitying and confrontational; she spoke in the passive voice, saying this act of terrible violence “just happened”. She looked out at the prosecution and asked: “Where was all these people at, right here, when I needed somebody?” She gestured to the Pelkes – and challenged them. “What’s going to happen if they take my life? Is that going to bring your mother back, your sister, your aunt? No, that is not going to bring her back. How would you all feel when I am in my grave?”

There was a disturbance in the courtroom. In the gallery, in the row just ahead of Bill, Paula’s grandfather was calling out: “My grandbaby! My grandbaby!” As he was escorted out by the bailiff, Bill saw that the old man was crying.

When the moment arrived for the judge to pronounce his sentence, the courtroom was completely silent. The judge, one reporter would later note, did not look Paula in the eye.

“I am concerned about your background,” he said. “I am concerned that you were born into a household where your father abused you, and your mother either participated or allowed it to happen. And those seem to be explanations or some indication of why you may be the type of personality that you are. They are not excuses, however. You committed the act, and you must pay the penalty.” The sentence he handed down was death.

There was a burst of noise as dozens of reporters ran from the room to file their stories. As the guards led Paula out, she did not speak. She would now be moved to Indianapolis, to the Indiana Women’s Prison. People streamed out into the hall, where Crawford and the Pelkes stood in a cluster. Someone shouted in their direction. “Are you satisfied now?” This was Rhonda, sobbing.

They did not respond. Bob told reporters: “As far as I’m concerned, justice has been done.”

**T**wo months later, a young woman in a hippy dress stepped out of her budget compact car in the parking lot of the women’s prison and headed to the visitor’s entrance. Monica Foster was petite – not much over five feet – and just three years out of law school.

This place was the first and oldest correctional facility for women in the US, home to a few hundred residents. A tall chainlink fence ran the perimeter of the grounds, crowned with razor wire. Inside, the walls were cement, the floors were linoleum and the doors were steel. Monica handed her ID to a staffer and said she was there to see Paula Cooper, inmate 864800 – though she hardly had to specify, as everyone knew about the teenage girl on death row. Monica stepped through the metal detector, then another steel door, and into a private room for attorney meetings, where she took a seat at the table and waited for her new client.

Paula was being kept in a part of the segregation unit that had recently been designated death row. Her cell was 2.5 metres by 3 metres, windowless and bright with fluorescent lighting. She washed her clothes in the small sink and kept the room clean; she had no chair to sit in and was growing accustomed to spending her waking hours perched on the bed. This first summer had been hot, with only a single fan to keep her comfortable. Hardest of all was the isolation: 23 hours a day with no contact with the prison’s general population, except those brief periods when another woman was put on the segregation wing. She did not know how many more of these days she could endure.

A guard led Paula to the meeting room, stepped outside and locked the two women in. The residents wore their own clothes here, and Paula had styled her hair and wore eye makeup. As they began talking, she burst into tears. “OK, we’re gonna breathe,” Monica said. “In through the nose, out through the mouth.” Paula would sob through most of the meeting.



Bill Pelke in 2015, outside his grandmother’s former home in Gary, Indiana. Photograph: Christian K Lee/AP

If Monica was honest with herself, she had expected to meet someone more animal than human – because what type of person, what 15-year-old, would do what she had done? But the girl looked so young, and so desperate. Monica quickly realised that Paula did not understand how the death penalty worked, how long the process of appeals could drag on – Paula thought the guards might take her off to the electric chair at any moment. This was the state she had been living in.

Monica told her they were filing an appeal, and that *if*Paula were to be executed, it would be many years off. She had a whole string of appeals ahead of her, Monica said; there were good and reasonable grounds why her death sentence might not stand. If things started to look bad, Monica would let her know – but even then, Paula’s execution would be years and yearsaway. She said: “Repeat back to me what I just told you.” She drew a chart for Paula that mapped out the entire appellate process with boxes and arrows. Monica promised her: “All of this is going to take many, many, many years.”

This finally calmed the girl down. But Monica could see that Paula was depressed – not only because of her immediate situation, but on a deeper level. Once Paula had started crying, it had been very hard for her to stop, and she remained overwhelmed. Nothing good had ever happened to her, she said, and nothing good would ever happen to her. This was Paula’s life story, and Monica was determined to disrupt it. She and the appeal team had a long journey ahead of them.

**T**hat November, Bill Pelke sat in his crane, high above the warehouse at Bethlehem Steel. Called in for a late shift, he had found the place empty, and had yet to receive instructions. The quiet was unsettling. Bill began thinking about the state his life was in: a constant unravelling. Just weeks earlier, on top of everything else, his girlfriend had left him. He felt as if his insides had cracked open. Suspended above the dim warehouse, with its faint smell of sulphur, Bill began crying and could not stop.

His mind turned to his grandmother, her absence. It had been four months since the last of those girls was sentenced. He pictured Paula, sitting in her cell, probably no bigger than this crane cab, her back up against the wall. In this image, she was crying just as he was, and she was asking aloud, *What have I done?*

As low as he was in his current state, it occurred to Bill that the girl was far more alone than he would ever be. He thought of her sentencing, the only time he had attended court. Seeing Paula in person, he had been struck by how young she looked: just turned 16, she was a *girl.*And immediately after her sentence was read, that man, the girl’s grandfather, the only grown family that had shown up – he had lost it. And he remembered how a guard had escorted the old man down the aisle, right past Bill, still calling out about his *baby*, wretched. Paula had been led out next, the front of her prison smock darkened with tears, her eyes darting from side to side as if looking for the person who might appear, at any moment, to help her.

A single photo of Bill’s grandmother was used in the press around her death. It was cropped from a church portrait of the Pelkes a few years previously, taken against a black backdrop: the men in off-the-rack suit jackets and wide ties, and the women in pretty, feminine blouses, their hair done. Move in closer and here was the familiar image: Ruth, standing to the right, with a ring of soft, silvery-white curls around her head, high cheekbones, a beatific half-smile. She wore cat’s-eye glasses and silver earrings the size of coat buttons. This was the photograph that had appeared in so many papers. And now, in Bill’s mind, the image transformed. His grandmother’s eyes began to shine, and tears began to run down her cheeks.

It seemed to Bill, in this moment, that Ruth’s feelings were passed to him, and flooded his chest. And he believed he understood: she was crying for that girl. And for the girl’s grandfather: she would not have wanted him to suffer the knowledge that his grandchild would be buckled into the electric chair. And she would not want this girl to be killed in her name.

For the first time, Bill believed it was possible that the girl did not know what she was doing when she killed Ruth, that she’d been out of her right mind. That a blind anger must have propelled her forward. And now his grandmother was calling on him to forgive her.

At first, the revelation changed nothing about his instincts towards the girl – they remained cool and hard. Bill had decided that he needed to forgive her, to offer his compassion – but he had none to give. And he knew that if he could not access his store of empathy, then he would feel he had failed his grandmother. Bill began to pray, the way a desperate person forms words, unable to prevent them slipping from his lips. Eventually, it came to him: if that girl was worth forgiving – if even his grandmother could feel compassion for her – then he must be, too. Though he had, in his own way, messed things up beyond repair, Bill himself must be worth preserving.

In the quiet of the mill, high above the silent machines, Bill considered what he would do. He would write Paula a letter, and tell her about his grandmother, and about her compassion. As he parsed the words he would write, Bill could see a way forward. He could imagine Paula, just maybe, writing back. And in his head this became a real correspondence. He wanted to know what she might say to him – not to explain what she had done, but as proof of her humanity. And Bill realised he did not want to see this girl die.

He had never considered Paula’s life before that day in the spring of 1985 – that is to say, he had never considered the life of a Black teenage girl in Gary. He had never considered the life of a kid who had run away from home so many times, passed from one emergency shelter or foster home to another. He was not the only one. Hurt and ugliness that belonged to all of Lake County, that could have been a shared responsibility, had instead been kept out of view. Some problems are called Black, some are called poor, some are called drunk or strung-out or unchristian – as if the fates and conditions of so many families are not connected. It is a choice to think this way – Bill understood that now. It is a perspective that requires effort and indoctrination, by family and faith and community.

Bill had visited only a few of the 50 American states, and had left the country exactly once, the year he was drafted into Vietnam. Otherwise, his life encompassed two abutting neighbourhoods – where he slept and where he worked – and the modest number of family and friends who lived on that route.

[[](https://www.theguardian.com/news/2019/sep/24/ursula-herrmann-germany-kidnapping-mystery)](https://www.theguardian.com/news/2019/sep/24/ursula-herrmann-germany-kidnapping-mystery)

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But the next morning, Bill acted on an impulse that would soon take him far outside the prescribed rhythm of his days. He sat up in the crane with an accordion of paper he had pulled from the office printer, the kind with the perforated edges, composing a letter in large, neat handwriting.

He was not a man who wrote letters, and he was not sure what to say. He was writing to someone from a Black neighbourhood on the other side of town. To a 16-year-old girl. To the girl who killed his grandmother – who stabbed her repeatedly, and left her to die.

Printing carefully, all in caps, he wrote: “I FORGIVE YOU.”He did not know what he expected in return.

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