Starved, tortured, forgotten: Genie, the feral child who left a mark on researchers

Author: Rory Carroll, July 14, 2016

She hobbled into a Los Angeles county welfare office in October 1970, a stooped, withered waif with a curious way of holding up her hands, like a rabbit. She looked about six or seven. Her mother, stricken with cataracts, was seeking an office with services for the blind and had entered the wrong room.

But the girl transfixed welfare officers.

At first they assumed autism. Then they discovered she could not talk. She was incontinent and salivated and spat. She had two nearly complete sets of teeth - extra teeth in such cases are known as supernumeraries, a rare dental condition. She could barely chew or swallow, and could not fully focus her eyes or extend her limbs. She weighed just 59lb (26kg). And she was, it turned out, 13 years old.

Her name – the name given to protect her identity – was Genie. Her deranged father had strapped her into a handmade straitjacket and tied her to a chair in a silent room of a suburban house since she was a toddler. He had forbidden her to cry, speak or make noise and had beaten and growled at her, like a dog.

It made news as one of the US's worst cases of child abuse. How, asked Walter Cronkite, could a quiet residential street, Golden West Avenue, in Temple City, a sleepy Californian town, produce a feral child – a child so bereft of human touch she evoked cases like the wolf child of Hesse in the 14th century, the bear child of Lithuania in 1661 and Victor of Aveyron, a boy reared in the forests of revolutionary France?

Over time, Genie slipped from headlines – Vietnam was burning, the Beatles were in the midst of breaking up – but she retained the attention of scientists, especially linguists. She was a prize specimen for having grown up without language or social training. Could she now learn language?

Jostling for access, they took brain scans and audio recordings, performed countless tests, compiled reams of data, published papers. And gradually they, too, with a few exceptions, also lost interest.

By the late 1970s, Genie had vanished back into obscurity. As she was a ward of California, authorities housed her in state-run institutions, her location secret. Four decades later, she apparently remains in state care.

"I'm pretty sure she's still alive because I've asked each time I called and they told me she's well," said Susan Curtiss, a UCLA linguistics professor who studied and befriended Genie. "They never let me have any contact with her. I've become powerless in my attempts to visit her or write to her. I think my last contact was in the early 1980s."

Authorities rebuffed Guardian inquiries. "If 'Genie' is alive, information relating to her is confidential and it does not meet the criteria of information that is available through a PRA Request," said Kim Tsuchida, a public records act coordinator for California's department of social services. "We would suggest that you contact Los

Angeles County with your request." LA County referred the query to mental health authorities, who did not respond to a written request.

With Genie approaching her 60th birthday, her fate remains an enigma. Has she learned to speak? To engage with the world? To be happy? Only a handful of people know.

But the story has an additional chapter: the fate of the other players. Almost all, it turns out, were scarred. Scarred psychologically and professionally in ways none anticipated, and which in some cases endure to this day.

There were the scientists and carers who studied and, in some cases, loved her. Their collaboration collapsed into feuds, vendettas and muck-raking.

There was the author who chronicled the saga and found it taking over his life. He moved to Paris to escape only for Genie's story to follow him and manifest itself in other ways.

There was Genie's older brother, who also suffered grievously under their father. He lived, in his own words, like a "dead man" and failed his own daughter – Genie's niece – who in turn failed her daughters.

The story begins with Genie's father, Clark Wiley. He grew up in foster homes in the Pacific north-west and worked as a machinist on aircraft assembly lines in LA during and after the second world war. He married Irene Oglesby, a dust bowl migrant 20 years his junior. A controlling man who hated noise, he did not want children. Yet children came. The first, a baby girl, died after being left in a cold garage. A second died from birth complications. A third, a boy named John, survived, followed five years later by the girl who would become known as Genie.

When a drunk driver killed Clark Wiley's mother in 1958, he unraveled into anger and paranoia. He brutalized John and locked his 20-month-old daughter alone in a small bedroom, isolated and barely able to move. When not harnessed to a potty seat, she was constrained in a type of straitjacket and wire mesh-covered crib. Wiley imposed silence with his fists and a piece of wood. That is how Genie passed the 1960s.

Irene, stricken by fear and poor eyesight, finally fled in 1970. Things happened swiftly after she blundered into the wrong welfare office. Wiley, charged with child abuse, shot himself. "The world will never understand," said the note.

Genie, a ward of court, was moved to LA's children's hospital. Pediatricians, psychologists, linguists and other experts from around the US petitioned to examine and treat her, for here was a unique opportunity to study brain and speech development – how language makes us human.

Genie could speak a few words, such as "blue", "orange", "mother" and "go", but mostly remained silent and undemonstrative. She shuffled with a sort of bunny hop and urinated and defecated when stressed. Doctors called her the most profoundly damaged child they had ever seen.

Progress initially was promising. Genie learned to play, chew, dress herself and enjoy music. She expanded her vocabulary and sketched pictures to communicate what words could not. She performed well on intelligence tests.

"Language and thought are distinct from each other. For many of us, our thoughts are verbally encoded. For Genie, her thoughts were virtually never verbally encoded, but there are many ways to think," said Curtiss,

one of the few surviving members of the research team. “She was smart. She could hold a set of pictures so they told a story. She could create all sorts of complex structures from sticks. She had other signs of intelligence. The lights were on.”

Curtiss, who was starting out as an academic at that time, formed a tight bond with Genie during walks and shopping trips (mainly for plastic buckets, which Genie collected). Her curiosity and spirit also enchanted hospital cooks, orderlies and other staff members.

Genie showed that lexicon seemed to have no age limit. But grammar, forming words into sentences, proved beyond her, bolstering the view that beyond a certain age, it is simply too late. The window seems to close, said Curtiss, between five and 10.

“Does language make us human? That’s a tough question,” said the linguist. “It’s possible to know very little language and still be fully human, to love, form relationships and engage with the world. Genie definitely engaged with the world. She could draw in ways you would know exactly what she was communicating.”

Yet there was to be no Helen Keller-style breakthrough. On the contrary, by 1972, feuding divided the carers and scientists. Jean Butler, a rehabilitation teacher, clashed with researchers and enlisted Irene, Genie’s mother, in a campaign for control. Each side accused the other of exploitation.

Research funding dried up and Genie was moved to an inadequate foster home. Irene briefly regained custody only to find herself overwhelmed – so Genie went to another foster home, then a series of state institutions under the supervision of social workers who barred access to Curtiss and others. Genie’s progress swiftly reversed, perhaps never to be recovered.

Russ Rymer, a journalist who detailed the case in the 1990s in two New Yorker articles and a book, Genie: a Scientific Tragedy, painted a bleak portrait of photographs from her 27th birthday party.

“A large, bumbling woman with a facial expression of cowlike incomprehension … her eyes focus poorly on the cake. Her dark hair has been hacked off raggedly at the top of her forehead, giving her the aspect of an asylum inmate.”

Jay Shurley, a professor of psychiatry and behavioral science who was at that party, and her 29th, told Rymer she was miserable, stooped and seldom made eye contact. “It was heartrending.”A veil cloaks Genie’s life since then. But a melancholy thread connects those she left behind.

For the surviving scientists it is regret tinged with anguish. Shurley’s verdict: “She was this isolated person, incarcerated for all those years, and she emerged and lived in a more reasonable world for a while, and responded to this world, and then the door was shut and she withdrew again and her soul was sick.”

Curtiss, who wrote a book about Genie, and is one of the few researchers to emerge creditably from the saga, feels grief-stricken to this day. “I’m not in touch with her, but not by my choice. They never let me have any contact with her. I’ve become powerless in my attempts to visit her or write to her. I long to see her. There is a hole in my heart and soul from not being able to see her that doesn’t go away.”

In an interview, Rymer said Genie’s story affected all those involved, himself included. “It made for a pretty intense and disturbing several years. This took over my life, my worldview. A lot about this case left me shaken. Maybe this is cowardice – I was relieved to be able to turn away from the story. Because anytime I went into that room [where Genie grew up], it was unbearable.”

But Rymer discovered he could not turn away, not fully. “I generally go on to another story. But I had to confront how much I identified with Genie. Being shut up, unable to express herself, I think that speaks to everyone. I think the person I was writing about was to some extent myself.”

Genie infiltrated his recent novel, Paris Twilight, set in France in 1990, said Rymer. “The novel details, as the Genie tale does more literally, an attempted escape from a small dank room and a thwarted life, into a palatial future that doesn’t in the end work out. It’s about the connection between science and emotion. So right there I’m still trying to resolve some of these issues. [In my experience] as a journalist, Genie, in ways I could never anticipate, brought up issues that will never release me.”

The legacy of Clark Wiley’s abuse never released Genie’s brother, John. After the beatings, and witnessing his sister’s suffering, he told ABC News in 2008: “I feel at times God failed me. Maybe I failed him.” He saw Genie for the last time in 1982 and lost touch with their mother, who died in 2003. “I tried to put [Genie] out of my mind because of the shame. But I’m glad she got some help.”

After brushes with the law, John settled in Ohio and worked as a housepainter. He married and had a daughter, Pamela. But the marriage crumbled and his daughter – Genie’s niece – turned to drugs.

In 2010, police found Pamela intoxicated and charged her with endangering her two daughters, Genie’s grandnieces. There would be no miracle turnaround, no happy ending. John, who had diabetes, died in 2011. Pamela, who apparently never met her aunt Genie, died in 2012.

In Arab folklore, a genie is a spirit imprisoned in a bottle or oil lamp who, when freed, can grant wishes. The waif who shuffled into the world in 1970 enchanted many people in that brief, heady period after her liberation

But granting wishes, like so much else, proved beyond her, perhaps because she never truly escaped.

Assignment:

Option 1: On a separate sheet of a paper, write a half-page summary describing the events that unfolded in the life of Genie Wiley. Be sure to elaborate in the cognitive and developmental deficiencies and explain why they occurred.

Option 2: Engage in a turn-n-talk session. Discuss with a partner (1-2 minutes) what you thought was the most interesting or shocking thing about the reading. Then, decide on which response you wish to share with the class. Prepare your statement/observation for a group discussion.