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STORY BY MAGGI DAVIS / PHOTOS BY KATIE HAYES

# Gary Lavergne

Gary Lavergne sits quietly in a small metal chair in a steel gray room, two prison guards behind him. He had arranged for this meeting a month before. “Would you guys mind calling my wife every hour or so?” he asked the guards, his voice tinged with the slightest Cajun accent. “It’s the only way she’d let me come here.” They agreed, chuckling.

Within minutes Gary Lavergne knew he would be staring at one of Texas’ most violent serial killers, “the poster boy of capital punishment,” Kenneth McDuff, who was less than a year away from being put to death.

He had been sentenced to death in 1966 after the rape and murder (known as the “Broomstick Murders”) of three teenagers. Yet, when the U.S. Supreme Court abolished capital punishment in 1972, and Texas changed its incarceration laws, McDuff was paroled from his life sentence in 1989.

It wasn’t long before McDuff was back to his old habits, raping and killing at least four women, including Melissa Northrup, his

22-year-old Quik-Pak market co-worker. By the time police found Northrup’s body, McDuff was already in Kansas City, Mo., though not for long. He was soon found and captured by Texas Rangers and U.S. Marshals Service.

Sentenced to death for a second time for the murder of Northrup in 1992, McDuff is the only man in U.S. history to have been sentenced to death, released, then sentenced to death a second time — for another crime.

As McDuff was escorted into the small room, he sat directly across from Lavergne, handcuffed and wearing an orange jumpsuit.

“He was easily the most evil person I’ve ever encountered,” Lavergne said. “With him it was an entire presence, like there was a third presence in the room. But the thing I remember most was his hands. They were the biggest hands I had ever seen.”

With McDuff standing 6 feet 4 inches tall and weighing more than 250 lbs. at age 51, it was hard to believe that Lavergne, at 5 feet 11 inches tall and a little less than 200 lbs., was still calm and

willing to talk to him.

"I really wasn't that afraid. If you showed him you weren't afraid, he eventually put his eyes down and played with his hands," Lavergne says. "He really was a big coward. He could take advantage of those small, powerless women, but when confronted head-on he was a coward."

The interview lasted five hours.

In the fall of 1998, McDuff was put to death. His final words: "I'm ready to be released. Release me." Lavergne finished a book about him a year later, entitled "Bad Boy From Rosebud: The Murderous Life of Kenneth Allen McDuff."

Lavergne's research style is interesting. Instead of the normal reporter's notebook or computer-based writing programs, Lavergne starts with plain 3-by-5 note cards.

"I had thousands of them," he says. "I just had to put them in order, and then I started writing."

Lavergne has had a lot of practice, since he's written other books about infamous Texas criminals. When he was writing his first book about Charles Whitman, "A Sniper in the Tower," Lavergne says he had no idea where to start, so he headed for the telephone Yellow Pages.

"I had this 100,000-word manuscript, and I didn't know what to do with it," Lavergne says. "A friend of mine said I should get an agent, so I opened up the Yellow Pages, found the first person listed as an agent, and he's been with me ever since."

Lavergne knows he had it easy: "A lot of what happened to me — I didn't force it. I wrote the manuscript. I never panicked. I never tried to beat someone's door down. It was either going to happen, or it wasn't."

Even after offers from other publishing companies, film studios and others, Lavergne says that the most important thing is to stay humble.

"I'm just a high school American history teacher from Louisiana," Lavergne says. "And when people come to me with all their offers and their money, all I say to them is, 'I wantya money, but I don't needya money.' It usually works."

Lavergne is one of many authors at The University of Texas, but not many support the genre of true crime. As director of Admissions Research at the university, Lavergne spends most of his days producing statistics and reports, validating the admissions process.

It wasn't until 1994 that Lavergne really started writing.

"I was watching a TV special on the tower sniper, Charles Whitman, and I was entranced," Lavergne says. "But when I went to the library to read a little more about it, I found that nothing had been written on Whitman or the incident — so I decided I'd



write

something." Three years later, he produced "A Sniper in the Tower."

"I've always loved history and writing, so combining my fascination with crime with that just seemed right," he says. Lavergne had found his second calling.

Lavergne has also written "Worse Than Death: The Dallas Nightclub Murders and the Texas Multiple Murder Law." That book recounts a 1984 tragedy when Moroccan national Abdelkrim Belachheb walked into a Dallas nightclub and gunned down seven people.

"McDuff was nothing compared to what I faced when I was researching that book," says Lavergne. "I was in the most dangerous part of Clements prison in Amarillo, the most dangerous prison in Texas. I was trying to get an interview with Belachheb, but he wouldn't see me. But walking the cellblock was one of the scariest things I have ever done. I could see inmates peering at me out of small square windows in a completely closed-off cell. These inmates are some of the worst criminals in Texas — they will kill you in a second without their blood pressure rising."

Lavergne has been showcased on a countless number of TV specials, and named as one of the six greatest crime authors in the nation by the History Channel.

Lavergne says he is now working on a different type of book: a biography about Heman Sweatt, a young black man refused entrance to the UT School of Law in 1950 based on his race.

But he still feels like that high school history teacher from Louisiana.

"All of this I've experienced so far has been amazing. I never imagined 10 years ago that I would have written four books and been featured on E! and the History Channel."

• Above: the special cubbyhole book case that Lavergne built to organize all of the note cards he writes with. They are separated by chapter.