

Cover Story

Crime hits home

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Close encounters with Birmingham cops & robbers

By: [Jesse Chambers](#)

It was Wednesday, Jan. 28, at about 6:30 p.m. Lynn Leishman was at home in Glen Iris, having a beer on her carport patio with Penny Cook.

Cook is Leishman's neighbor and, for the last 10 years, one of her best friends. The carport functions as a kind of front porch at the Leishman home, the site of many happy gatherings of family and friends. Leishman and Cook spend a lot of time there after work — chatting, recounting the day's events, solving each other's problems.

Cook would later recall that she was "comfortably half-slouched" in warm wool outerwear, what she calls her "front porch coat." She could feel herself relaxing, the tensions of the workday relaxing their grip.

After all, the carport is a place where Cook and Leishman have made a lot of good memories. "This is where I have been consoled for the loss of a loved one, poured my heart out to her for advice, laughed till I snorted," Cook says. "I have danced and sang, played Balderdash, shared one of Lynn's fabulous meals."

Cook felt happy there. She felt safe.

However, this happy mood was about to be shattered.

Cook had just started her second beer when she and Leishman were startled by two young African-American men who came around suddenly from the front of the house.

"Where's the money?" the men demanded. "Give us the money!"

One of the young men was waving what appeared to be a gun. *Is it a toy?* Cook wondered. *Surely this is a prank.*

"Oh, you scared me," Leishman told the men, also thinking, or hoping, that this might be a joke, that they might be friends of Sam, her 19-year-old son.

"Give us the money!" the men repeated.

That's when Leishman saw the small, silver revolver and noticed that the men's faces were covered with bandanas.

"We don't have any money," Leishman said. And it was true. Leishman had about \$30 in cash. Cook had none.

Cook looked intently at the robbers. *Do I know them?* she wondered. Their eyebrows seemed to be waxed. They were wearing what appeared to be designer jeans and expensive shoes. One guy wore a tan hooded sweatshirt and the other a dark blue denim jacket. They were both about 5'7" and 150 pounds.

"You really don't want to do this," Leishman said.

"Get in the house!" the men told them.

Is this it? Cook wondered. *I'm 46. Is it over? Are they going to rape us, kill us?* She thought of her children, two girls and two boys.

Cook opened the door, and the one without the gun pinned her against the kitchen sink, his back to hers.



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"I'm not going in the house," Leishman told the men. She was afraid of what might happen to her and Cook if they went inside, where no one on the street could possibly see what was going on.

The young man with the gun grabbed Leishman's cell phone and keys, then grabbed her by her coat and forced her through the doorway into the kitchen.

Is he going to shoot her? Cook wondered. She saw the terror on Leishman's face.

"Where's your purse?" the guy with the gun asked Cook.

She pointed to a bag on the kitchen floor. He grabbed it, and also snatched Leishman's purse from the kitchen counter.

Then, as suddenly as they had arrived, the robbers were gone.

"Call 911," Leishman screamed at Cook, who was shaking uncontrollably. "Penny, call 911," Leishman screamed again. Cook came back to her senses and grabbed her cell phone, while Leishman ran outside, hoping to spot a vehicle.

"Come back, Lynn, they could still be close," Cook yelled. Agitated, unable to think straight, she struggled to remember Leishman's street address as she punched in the number.

"911. What's your emergency?" the dispatcher asked.

"We've been robbed," Cook said.

Crime is, almost by definition, an invasion or a violation. One person steals or damages another person's property. One person does bodily harm to another. However, the effects of crime, especially violent crime, are often not just physical or financial.

Crime, and the fear and paranoia it creates, can damage victims psychologically, and perhaps even poison an entire community. Crime may be very personal, motivated by passion, or revenge. It may be highly impersonal, as in the sudden, shocking gunpoint robbery at the Leishman house, during which the perpetrators proclaimed loudly and repeatedly that they wanted the money, the money they assumed the women would have.

Fortunately, these young men, at least on that day, were willing to take what they could, including some credit cards, and leave Leishman and Cook alive. They chose not to use that gun that one of them was brandishing.

"I am grateful that my friend and I were not physically injured," Leishman says. And she should be. Many people in the city of Birmingham have not been so lucky.

According to statistics compiled on bhamwiki.com, Birmingham already had 11 reported homicides as of Feb. 13 of this year. The city had 88 homicides in 2008, 93 in 2007 and 109 in 2006.

According to statistics released in January by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, 35 people were murdered in Birmingham during the first six months of 2008. The city was ranked number 6 in homicides for the period among U.S. cities over 100,000 in population.

The city ranked number 16 in overall violent crime, which includes murders, rapes, robberies and assaults, and number 3 in property crimes, including burglaries, larcenies and car thefts.

With statistics like that, you may wonder why this newspaper is only now doing a cover story about crime. Our explanation must include a disclosure.

The robbery at the Leishman house, that seemingly impersonal crime, is actually quite personal for the staff of *Birmingham Weekly*. Cook's husband, Brad, is one of the paper's account executives. Lynn Leishman is the paper's general manager. Her husband, Chuck Leishman, is our publisher.

"After getting robbed, and people finding out about it, and hearing about all the other things that are going on, I think it's the right thing for us to do to get out there and talk about crime," Chuck says.

At press time, there had been no arrests and no new leads, according to Det. Alanda McCurdy and Sgt. Anthony Williams, the two investigators in the Robbery Division of the Birmingham Police Department assigned to the case.

"Det. McCurdy and Sgt. Williams have been very helpful, but I feel the police department, unfortunately, just doesn't have the resources to investigate a crime like this petty robbery," Lynn says.

She and Cook were also disappointed that it took the police department between 10 and 20 minutes after Cook's 911 call to send an officer to the Leishman home. According to Leishman, the officer who arrived to take their report, Officer Reva Palmer, said that she had to come from the Lakeshore area because the

other officers at the South Precinct were busy on other calls.

Several other residents of Glen Iris said that the brazen nature of the gunpoint robbery at the Leishman home was unsettling.

"This is the first time we've heard of somebody holding somebody up with a gun, and that's frightening," says Laney DeJonge, the president of the Friends of George Ward Park. "It's always been small, petty stuff, people breaking in, but nobody with a gun."

According to DeJonge, this incident was particularly disturbing because of where and how it occurred. "People tell you to be aware when you pull up and get out and go into your house, but when you're just sitting in your yard, when you can't enjoy that, that's bad," she says.

Valerie Abbott, a long-time resident of the neighborhood and a member of the Birmingham City Council, says that she herself has suffered burglaries but has never been robbed at gunpoint.

"We think we all know what we're dealing with, but when a robbery occurred in our neighborhood, we were shocked," Abbott says. "We thought we were immune."

Chuck recalls the emotions he felt as he hurried home, after getting a call from Lynn in the immediate aftermath of the robbery. "I kept my eyes open on the way home, to see if I could see anybody speeding away," he says. "Of course, that was just my response. The guys were long gone. I felt violated. And the women must have felt completely violated. And I was mad. I felt like, 'Let me at 'em!' I'm glad I didn't see them, because that would not have been a solution."

The Leishmans have lived in the house for seven years and had believed that their neighborhood was safe. "There's never been an incident like that, and talking to our neighbors, they've never had incidents like that," Chuck says. "I guess that's a good thing. It's kind of a random occurrence."

Random or not, the event and its aftermath were extremely trying for Lynn and Cook, despite the fact that they not been harmed physically. In addition to the normal hassles associated with having one's purse stolen — Lynn had all the locks changed and updated her alarm system; Cook spent three days closing bank accounts, opening new accounts and making sure checks she had written would clear — the women had to deal with the crime's emotional and psychological effects.

At the advice of a friend who had also been robbed, Cook wrote several emails about the event in order to process her feelings.

"They have my identity, my keys, my photos, things dear to me," Cook wrote. "I feel violated. How could someone do this to someone else?"

"Next day, I get ready for work," Cook continued. "I feel I am on the brink of something. I feel something. I'm not sure what it is. So I go to work. Everyone is so concerned. I recount the events, then it hits. That feeling explodes. I sob, I shake, I can't stop. I could have died. I want to hide. I want to hurt them, they hurt me. And so today, three days later, I am better, even though it replays in my mind over and over. I am grateful I am alive. My best friend is alive."

When I interviewed Cook on Feb. 13, she said that she was still very fragile. "I thought I was kind of over it and I went to the chiropractor and told the story and just fell apart," she says.

I asked her how the robbery had changed her. "I've just been really irritable, really short," she says. "I look around, no matter where I am. I don't like to go out at night. That may pass. A girl at work let me borrow her gun for a few days, but I was uncomfortable having the gun in the house with my kids. I have pepper spray. I didn't have it with me that night, but I keep it with me now."

"Last night, a guy walked by our house and he had the same color sweatshirt as one of the robbers, and it freaked me out. It may or may not have been him, but it would help me if they were caught. Knowing they are out there and could do it to someone else is a scary thought."

Cook has been the victim of crime before, but it was not as threatening as this incident. "We had our house broken into but not like that, up close and personal," she says. The worst thing, she said, is where it occurred. "It happened at someone's home, at Lynn's house. That's probably the most disturbing thing for me, and also how quickly it happened."

Lynn has also felt the emotional aftershocks. "I make sure all the doors and windows are locked," she says. "I set the alarm even when I'm in the house. I'm fearful about having to go out at night now when I have to go home in the dark by myself. I am constantly on edge if I'm outside, looking over my shoulder, going out to the front yard to scope it out to see if there's anything unusual going on, anybody who's not supposed to be in that neighborhood."

Lynn was robbed at gunpoint in Kansas City 35 years ago, when she and a girlfriend were on the way to meet some friends at a club. "I was so angry," she recalls. "It's a good thing I didn't have a gun in my pocket, because I would have used it. That's how angry I was both times."

According to Lynn, Officer Palmer advised her to keep a gun in the house. "She said that if they came

back to the house and used the keys and tried to get in, even with an alarm, the gun would be better to scare them away," Lynn says. "I just think owning a weapon is such a huge responsibility. I've owned guns in the past. I just don't feel comfortable."

It is not just Lynn and Cook, but other Glen Iris residents, who have been affected by the robbery. "I'm looking around when I get out of my car now," Abbott says. "It's not a very comfortable feeling. I wasn't scared before, but now I feel that the walk between my car and my front door is scary. What would I do if I heard feet walking up behind me? I had not thought of that before. But you can't help it. Even if the chances are remote, it still crosses your mind."

The inevitable question seems to be whether the City of Birmingham, and the Birmingham Police Department, are doing enough to solve the problem, either in Glen Iris or the city as a whole.

Michael Gray, president of the Glen Iris Neighborhood Association, seems fairly optimistic about the policing of Glen Iris. He says that several officers from the South Precinct — including officers Travis Hendrix and Emerson Oldham and Capt. Jamal McCaskey — have attended neighborhood meetings recently and encouraged residents to call the police if they see anything suspicious. Hendrix and Oldham, according to Gray, even provided attendees at the meeting with their cell phone numbers.

"The perception is that the force is more proactive now under Roper," Gray says, referring to A.C. Roper, who took over as chief of police in Birmingham in 2007. "When people call things in, they seem to get on them faster. There seems to be more accountability and response. You can follow up and ask how the case is going. The emphasis is now, 'Call us and we'll get on it.' They want the neighbors to be the eyes and ears. We think the neighborhood feels more confident than we did a few years ago."

"We think it's important to have an officer who knows the neighborhood, because he'll know that somebody doesn't fit in," says DeJonge, who speaks very highly of Oldham, who has patrolled the area for years. "But we need more officers. The area they patrol is too large."

DeJonge, who is also a co-owner of Rojo, a popular bar and restaurant in the Highland Park neighborhood, would like to see crime reduction become a primary focus for the city. "I think it's great that they're improving the streets, but if the city's crime perception was lowered, that would make a huge difference," she says. "If people think the city is safe, more people will eat and shop here, and that generates more tax revenue. More people would live here. And then the schools improve. Everything improves based on safety."

Abbott expresses confidence in Roper. "I feel he's the man for the job. I think the mayor made a good choice, and Roper's working on the problems. But they have a big job ahead of them. Forty-two percent of households in Birmingham live on less than \$25,000 per year. Given the economy, it's not going to get better as far as people stealing other people's possessions. When people don't have jobs, some of them will resort to criminal activity."

Teresa Thorne is a former Birmingham police officer and now executive director of City Action Partnership (CAP), a privately funded organization staffed by safety guides who assist motorists and assist the Birmingham Police Department in patrolling a large area in the City Center.

Thorne defends the efforts of the police department. "It's a really tough challenge," she says. "The causes of crime are so multilayered. Some things are so far beyond a police department's ability. For example, there are studies that show that quality pre-school has a long-term effect on whether a person later commits crime. How does a police department affect that?"

Thorne also mentions such factors as poverty and high school dropout rates. "All those kinds of things are responsibilities of the entire community to address," she says. "When we point a finger at law enforcement, we may have blinders on regarding these other factors."

Thorne also defends the dedication and professionalism of most of the officers in the Birmingham Police Department. "I know from personal experience that they are committed," she says.

However, Thorne believes that the city does not have enough police. "They have challenges as far as personnel restrictions," she says.

According to Chuck, Birmingham should closely examine its priorities.

"Is it more important to have a first-class police force or a dome?" he asks. "I think that's an easy one. We need to quit hearing about how we're one of the top crime cities in America."

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