

Carol Howe Speaks // Debutante to Defendant, And Back to Mainstream // Ex-Informant to Testify Today Before Grand Jury

David Harper | Posted: Wednesday, October 8, 1997 12:00 am

Part of the appeal of former ATF informant Carol Howe's story is its Patty Hearstesque overtones.

After all, she came from wealth. She attended a private religious school and was a debutante in 1989.

How does one go from that to running around in the woods in Nazi regalia in white-separatist enclave Elohim City?

The 26-year-old Tulsan has gained national and international media attention through her role as an ATF informant, U.S. District Judge Richard P. Match's refusal to allow her testimony in Timothy McVeigh's trial in the Oklahoma City bombing case and her own indictment and subsequent acquittal in Tulsa federal court on bomb threat and conspiracy charges.

On Wednesday, she re-enters the spotlight when she appears before an Oklahoma County grand jury investigating the possibility of a wider conspiracy in the Oklahoma City bombing.

She's likely to tell the jury what she was ready to tell McVeigh's jury before Matsch ruled it irrelevant. What the grand jurors are not likely to hear, though, is her transition from debutante to white separatist and back to the mainstream.

The downward spiral was a gradual one, she says, explaining that she lived in several places in the early 1990s, either taking college classes or

working a variety of "non-career" type jobs. In Colorado, she says, she spent too much time skiing and not enough studying.

Back in Oklahoma in 1994, Howe says she got involved with racists after a group of black men pushed her off a ledge at a local park, shattering her heels.

Some people have questioned if that's exactly how the injuries occurred. But the multiple scars on her feet stand as testament that the injuries are real.

"I had led a sheltered life to a degree to that point. That had been my first experience with blacks," Howe told the Tulsa World last week. "I just felt angry and hostile and wanted to lash out. I thought, 'Those three guys are out walking around while I'm stuck in this wheelchair.'

"A lot of things were making me vulnerable at the time," she continued. "I guess that's why I sought out a gang. I just saw (the racist community) as a group that would be protective of me. You know -- 'Surely white racists won't let something like this happen to me again.' I was acting out of my anger."

In retrospect, she sees many of her actions as ways of trying to fill the chasm she had felt all her life until she met her birth mother.

"When I met her, any vestige of needing to belong to a group was gone," Howe said. "All my life I was restless. I'm much more serene now."

Even though Howe does not describe herself as "happy," she said her life has improved since the reunion with her birth mother in early 1996. Howe said she was adopted at birth by former MAPCO President Bob Howe and Aubyn Howe.

Carol -- who has a brother named Chris -- said the family has

always been close and has been made even more so by recent events.

But she says she was always searching for an identity until she was reunited with her birth mother.

Howe said the woman offered her emotional support during a turbulent time and, though she was worried about Howe's travails, she always stood by her through phone calls and attendance at her trial.

Howe admits that she was a rebellious youth, but she is baffled by the public's interest in that part of her life.

"It has nothing whatsoever to do with Oklahoma City and whether I'm telling the truth about that," she said.

Howe said she was addicted to cocaine eight years ago and that she is proud that she overcame the problem.

"To me, it's a good thing," she said. "Not that I used to use cocaine, but that I was able to beat it and stay clean."

Because of the notoriety resulting from her roles in the bomb cases and her privileged upbringing, Howe has received multiple requests for interviews with the national press, along with book and movie offers.

Howe seems genuinely flummoxed by the media frenzy over her life. She expects to appear on ABC-TV's "Prime Time Live" -- possibly as early as this month. A Rolling Stone writer was in town last month. Howe did not grant the writer an interview and has no plans to do so.

"I hate the attention," she said. "I get no pleasure out of it at all.

... I've been hiding from it for the last two months. When I'm held up to the spotlight, all I see is my flaws. When a person is not expecting to be in the limelight, it's very intimidating, and it's very frightening."

Howe jots down license plate numbers of suspicious cars and claims she was chased by skinheads in traffic a few weeks ago.

Still, she said she feels safer now that she's gotten her guns back.

"I've got to be careful how I say that, because everybody already thinks of me as some sort of crazy militant," she said. "But for a few months there, I was kind of a sitting duck. It was reported that I was confined to my house and forbidden to have firearms. Luckily, though, I had and still have the best security in Tulsa."

Howe's interaction with people in the "movement" convinced her that some radical, anti-government types are dangerous and will pose a continuing threat to the nation's security in the years to come.

"I've been out there. I've seen the danger that exists," she said.

"Oklahoma City was not an isolated incident," Howe said. "The plan among the people I hung out with was to continue to hit federal buildings and that it should continue to escalate -- not dwindle.

"I think the perception in the general public is that Oklahoma City acted to turn people (already involved in such groups) against the movement. It didn't. It just turned them further in."

Howe said she once believed the anti-government sentiment she saw would result in a Second Civil War in which a person was on "one side or the other, or you were dead." She said she now thinks a future United States resembling something like Northern Ireland or the Middle East is more likely.

She offered no simple answers to defuse an ominous future for the United States except for perhaps something resembling peace talks.

Howe thinks conciliatory efforts between the government and the radical right might help prevent future terrorist acts such as the Oklahoma City bombing. But even if her life -- and life story -- should ultimately serve such a purpose, she knows that some will never completely forgive her for

her career as a racist.

After the Tulsa World published a letter to the editor in August praising Howe and even suggesting that she deserves a Medal of Honor for her efforts as an informant, four more letters that bashed her were quickly received.

One said, "Carol Howe chose her medal when she got that Nazi tattoo."

(She had obtained a swastika tattoo on her shoulder and an Iron Cross on her leg during her days as a white separatist.) Another letter closed with,

"Remember, O.J. was acquitted, too."

But Howe said a lot of people have made poor choices and then tried to make amends.

"People can have their opinions. But there's not many of us who don't have things in our past we wish we hadn't done. You have to try to come out of bad experiences and learn from them. I've made mistakes, but that doesn't make me a bad person."

Howe said she finds a bit of irony in her unpopularity in some circles.

"I guess some people who haven't met me hate me, which is similar to racism," Howe said. "So, I guess it's coming back on me, and I don't like the way it feels."