

W11 – Feature profile writing

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The Virginian-Pilot

**Sexual abuse survivor makes the story her own**

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**She survived years of sexual abuse at the hands of her stepfather. Now she's making the story her own.**

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"Daddy's Wives" is a memoir of trauma and defiance.

Published in Norfolk in 2010, the book recalls the pain, the anger and the helplessness of being raised by a serial child rapist and a mother who was complicit in her daughters' anguish.

It was printed under the alias Savannah Madison and set in an unnamed city on the East Coast. But now, nearly a decade later, its author is ready to reveal herself and claim her story.

Her name is Rose Arrington, and she has agreed to identify herself in hopes that other sexual assault victims will find healing in her tale.

She grew up in Portsmouth's low-income Brighton neighborhood, where her stepfather, Pinrecko L. "P.L." Artise Jr., used his wealth and influence to force a house full of girls into a life of sexual servitude.

"I just sat down and started writing. The memories were so strong," said Arrington, 68, who now sits on the Norfolk Redevelopment and Housing Authority, advocating for some of the region's poorest and most vulnerable people. "It destroys you."

Artise was indicted in 1993 on rape and incest charges after Arrington and her sisters broke decades of silence with allegations of physical, sexual and mental torture they endured since they were toddlers and well beyond their teenage years. He took a plea deal and was found guilty of four counts of rape the next year. Circuit Judge Norman Olitsky ordered him to spend seven years in prison but suspended most of the sentence.

Artise only spent six months behind bars. He died in 1998, and 10 years later, Arrington decided to write about what happened.

Her book, dedicated to "all those young girls and boys who lost their innocence before its time," was therapy.

"This journey to my past was very painful," an acknowledgement section reads. "This spiritual walk with God has allowed my path to be filled with so many people who cried with me, listened to me, and cared for me."

### **An uphill fight for justice**

Virginian-Pilot reporter M. Anthony Tibbs made the horrific story public in 1993 after one of Arrington's sisters reached out to him. Before then, prosecutors had declined to pursue the case.

"She was crying. She was screaming. I was trying to calm her down," Tibbs said in a phone call from Cleveland, where he is now a pastor. "She tells me this harrowing story about this compound where every night this guy had his pick of the litter -- his wife's children and some of his own children. He was just having his way with them."

By that time, Artise had a reputation as a slumlord in Portsmouth. He made headlines through the 1980s for crowding poor tenants and subjecting them to squalid living conditions. Hundreds were evicted, and their tribulations highlighted the city's ongoing affordable housing crisis.

"Despite valiant efforts by community and church groups, there just aren't enough places available for the families trapped in Artis (sic) dwellings," The Pilot's editorial board wrote on July 23, 1982. "If there were, he could never have acquired the power and wealth — he claims to be worth more than \$6 million — he now possesses."

For years, Tibbs reported, people had gossiped about how Artise was both father and grandfather to some of his offspring.

"Their mother was so desperate to be with this guy that she essentially sacrificed her children for him," Tibbs recalled last week, describing the family's financial dependence on him.

Ghonieteen Brown never apologized for what she did to her daughters. But before she died several years ago — the date of her death is unclear — Arrington said she forgave her.

The women say Artise was so brazen he would often rape one girl as her sisters lay in bed awake next to them. Neighbors would laugh when he told them he was a polygamist and referred to his daughters and stepdaughters as his wives.

He impregnated them, forcing some to have babies and others to undergo abortions.

Frustrated by police inaction, the sisters made a plan. They filed a civil case against Artise in municipal court, and in those records, they included their accusations of rape against him.

"That gave us the leeway to go in, to write about this story and to quote the allegations that they were making," Tibbs said. "They just wanted this thing to be told."

Once the allegations were public, prosecutors indicted Artise. And Tibbs, who had been wary of committing libel, reported about the women's abuse, protected from legal liability because the allegations were now spelled out in court filings. At the time, the sisters said they spoke with Tibbs and agreed to have their names published because they hoped the attention would result in criminal charges against their father.

"I'll never forget that story," said Tibbs, who has since become friends with the sisters and talks with them once a year despite living 500 miles away. "They've been through a lot of tragedy."

### **A legacy of trauma**

After Artise's brief prison stint, Arrington's younger sister, Eunice Winborne, became an advocate for victims of incest, rape and sexual abuse. She used her own money to fund an organization called The Survival Corner that no longer operates, though Winborne still seeks speaking engagements on the subject from her home near Atlanta.

"After two years in court with this man, I said, 'I'm going to do something to help others,'" said Winborne, 67. "What we went through — we turned a negative into a positive."

Over the years she's worked with nonprofits, jails and crisis centers to help other victims. The sisters said they spoke about their abuse in the 1990s on talk shows hosted by Geraldo Rivera and Montel Williams.

Arrington and Winborne have always been close. In her book, Arrington recalled the joy of helping her little sister Tracy — a pseudonym for Winborne — escape from home.

"We each other's rock," Winborne said. "We keep each other encouraged."

Their abuser held such a stranglehold over them that for years after they became adults, it seemed impossible to leave.

Arrington, the first to go, ran out of money and came back home after two weeks. Winborne left and was arrested several times for petty crimes. A third sister left on her 18th birthday and served time for a felony.

When she was 12, Winborne had an abortion. Arrington, meanwhile, gave birth at age 23 to her abuser's son — a child she detested at birth but has grown to love fiercely.

Pinrecko Artis — he dropped the letter 'e' that his father typically used in his surname — lives in Virginia Beach with two boys of his own.

"I struggled to find a moral compass," said Artis, who remembers seeing his father rape Arrington when he was a child. He told the authorities to no avail.

"He had this control over the police and the schools."

Artis had a lonely childhood. He bore into his studies to avoid talking about his family with classmates. As an adult, he contemplated suicide. He joined a cult.

Today, at 45, he's fighting depression and kidney failure with the help of his mom. Arrington told her son about the book before going through with publication — she didn't want him to relive his own trauma. But he encouraged her to do it.

Though the book didn't have quite the reach he'd hoped for, Artis was glad she'd found a way to cope.

### **A story claimed**

Publisher Cliff Johnson, captivated by the story and its potential to draw readers, said he has printed small batches at no charge to Arrington. She hasn't gotten any money from the project.

Over the years, Johnson said he has printed about 70 copies of the book at a rough cost of a little over \$1,000. He'll usually print a batch of 10 to 15 books each time Arrington plans to do a reading.

It's not easily available on retail websites like Amazon, and the Norfolk Public Library doesn't have the book but can obtain it through interlibrary loan. Arrington says she's working on a second part, and she's also thought about making a documentary with Johnson.

"When she handed me the manuscript, I couldn't imagine children being in this position," Johnson said. "For her, it was a healing process to be able to write it down."

He's been dead for decades, but Artise's influence still lingers in Arrington's life. There are relics of him everywhere — in his son's hazel eyes, in the name he forced Arrington to give the boy.

For so long, her life was dictated by his demands.

She leaves all the doors in her apartment open, afraid of who might be lurking on the other side. The smell of Irish Spring soap — his favorite — makes her want to vomit.

"He would go into the room to feel you," she said, squirming in her seat during an interview in her living room. "Goodness, goodness, goodness."

But his power is fading.

She doesn't remember why she chose Madison for the alias she used to write "Daddy's Wives," but she picked Savannah because she once read a book that featured a strong female character with that name.

"I liked it," Arrington said. "She didn't take nothing off nobody."