

Turning On the Lights

After growing up in the witness protection program, Jackee Taylor struggles to find out who she really is

BY ROBERT STRUCKMAN

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN WARNER

MONTANA WAS A TWISTED VERSION OF HELL DURING the dark winter of 1982 for 7-year-old Jackee Taylor. She, her mom, and her little brother and sister had just moved into a cruel imitation of a New Orleans-style residential motel on First Avenue North, one block north of the railroad tracks in downtown Billings. Built in 1959, the two-story structure featured a wrought-iron railing on its outside staircase and a second-floor walkway overlooking the parking lot.

Montana was cold. Jackee's family was unprepared for the kind of cold that can hurt your lungs, freeze the Yellowstone River, and create a thick crust of frost on the inside of the windowpanes. They had come from Cleveland, by way of Florida, on the run from death threats from the Hell's Angels because Jackee's father, already in federal custody, had decided to testify against his former fellow club members in Cleveland. Eventually, he pled guilty to the shotgun murder of a 17-year-old boy in Ohio and served eight years in prison.

Jackee's family had entered the federal Witness Protection



Jackee Taylor's motto is "Never let your light go out." Here, she tosses a dome-shaped strobe light on the rimrocks overlooking Billings.



Program under the care of the U.S. Marshals Service. Jackee's mother was scared and more than a little desperate. It's not like in the movies, where witness protection means relocating into a nice suburban home with a manicured lawn and a job. The family arrived at a motel advertising monthly rates on the edge of a bleak downtown in a city that seemed close to nowhere. They didn't have a vehicle. Or warm boots. Or sufficient winter coats.

In the early '80s, there was no romantic ring to the name of the state. This was years before *A River Runs Through It* and decades before the TV series *Yellowstone*. The oil boom of the '70s had ended. Thousands of jobs had been lost. Businesses were closing. In other words, Montana as a lifestyle hadn't been invented yet. Not that any of that would have made a difference to a 7-year-old girl being told to forget her whole life, including the name she was born with.

Jackee filled a notebook with her new name. Instead of Jacqueline Crouch, she was now Jackee Taylor, which she wrote in her looping penmanship over and over and over again on every page.

I DENTITY IS A FUNNY THING. It can be deeply personal, the sense of who you are inside, while in the legal sense it is almost clinical, oddly impersonal. Your legal identity is manifest primarily in a birth certificate and a social security card, both of which you need to get a job or a driver's license or a passport or health insurance or to play on a sports team or to go to college or a trade school. If your birth certificate says one thing, and then you use a different name to try to get a driver's license, you might find yourself suspected of fraud, maybe facing charges.

For those in witness protection, including children who entered the program without other options, the charge of fraud is a very real danger, even though the identity they can be accused of stealing is their own.

Jackee tried to live by the new rules of her life. Her dad worked on a ship somewhere. Or so she thought until she heard her mom tell her grade school counselor that her beloved father was in prison for murder. In middle school, Jackee started drinking and using drugs. Before long, she became a regular user of methamphetamines and cocaine.

"I honestly did not have a clue who I was. I didn't know if I was good. I didn't know if I was bad. I wanted to know if I had

Jackee Taylor emerged from the veil of witness protection 13 years ago when she told her story to the *Billings Gazette*.

black blood or red blood. I knew if my blood was black, I would be bad, like my dad," she says. At times she wanted to be good. Not always. Being bad had its own sweet and horrid allure. As a teenager, Jackee ran away from home and was kicked out of her home and at times lived in group homes. She dropped out of high school, got into fights and did and said a lot of crazy things.

Saying crazy things is kind of what Jackee is all about. Now 47, she often says she has a big mouth. Her self-deprecating humor can be downright mean, yet she also says with a grateful tone that her big mouth is probably the one reason why she's still alive. Her need to gather and expose information about her own life is entangled in why and how she kicked hard drugs and how she began to turn her life around.

Thirteen years ago, one of Jackee's young children needed health insurance. But Jackee Taylor didn't have a social security card or a birth certificate and had changed the spelling of her name at least three times. She couldn't sign her kid up for the Montana Children's Health Insurance Plan, known as Healthy Montana Kids. Jackee was 34. She had been living in secrecy and fear her entire life. She decided to finally and fully blow her cover. She told her story to a Billings newspaper reporter named Greg Tuttle.

It's hard to overstate how much that initial news story changed Jackee's life. She got healthcare for her kids. She got documents so she could prove who she was to potential employers and rental agencies. She started to get phone calls from other adults who had entered witness protection as children, which meant that she wasn't alone. She got phone calls from reporters and documentary film producers. She never wants to be without her story, so she squirreled away multiple copies of that initial *Gazette* story. After so many years of living a lie that had been forced upon her, Jackee had some truth, and it felt amazing.

"They taught us to lie," Jackee said. "Think of what that does to a kid."

None of that means that her life got easy or under control. That's not how things work. Epiphanies are great, but they don't change chemical dependencies or habits or dysfunctions or much else, and Jackee will be the first to tell you that she had plenty to work on. She talks like someone who has spent years in therapy. The important thing is that today addiction no longer drives her life, and that's a big deal.

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For Jackee, though, finding and telling her truth had its own pitfalls. Her mother and her siblings, who weren't interviewed for this story, don't want their story getting out. That's fair for them, Jackee says, but ... for herself ... she needs to be able to talk.

And so she does.

ABOUT A YEAR AFTER TUTTLE'S FEATURE, a producer from a documentary team from a company called RUMUR Inc. reached out to ask if he could document her life and personal journey. She said yes. Producer David Beilinson and his team captured hundreds of hours of footage of Jackee's journey of discovery.

She knew almost nothing about the why and how of her family's move to Montana, except that she used to have a different name. She knew that her father had been released from prison in 1992 because he sent her and her brother and sister cards with \$20 bills. Jackee's mother had filed for divorce from Clarence Crouch back in 1985 while he was in prison. He never lived in Montana. After prison, he promised to stay in touch, but he didn't. Instead, he started a new life under a new name. Jackee knew the Hell's Angels were involved, and she also knew that, deep inside her heart, almost nothing soothed her anxiety as well as the distinctive low and throaty sound of a Harley Davidson motorcycle.

All this fascinated Beilinson.

"People in the witness protection program rarely go public, and never has there been a character as compelling as Jackee," Beilinson said.

Jackee's father, whose given name was Clarence Addie Crouch, only used that name in official testimony. He went by Butch.

In 2006, Jackee had tracked down her father's sister in Louisiana. Her aunt surprised her by saying that her father was living less than two hours away in Texas. He was an old man with no teeth who was going by a new name, Paul Dome. Jackee paid him a visit, and the two reconciled and began to correspond by mail. Later, she visited with the documentary team. After his death, Jackee saw a reference to herself in his papers. Her father had written that he was proud of her for ending the secrecy.

PAPER AND INK ARE IMPORTANT TO JACKEE. She has bundles of photographs, reams of printed materials, and tattoos up and down her arms and neck and back. She has photos of herself as a girl, she has memorial tattoos for friends and family who have died, and she has copies of her father's testimony in jury trials of other gang members, and even transcripts of her father speaking in a U.S. Senate hearing on the violence, murder, drug-dealing and other business of motorcycle gangs.





Above: Jackee Taylor has photos of her father, Butch, taken at various times during his life. She found the pictures in a trunk that survived a fire where the bodies of Butch's wife and stepson were found. His criminal behavior, and testimony against fellow gang members, landed his family in the limbo of witness protection.

Left: Jackee's tattoos are memorials to friends and family members who have died. On her upper right arm is one for suicide prevention.

On her right arm is a tattoo for suicide awareness.

The events of the early morning hours of July 8 in 2013, when her father killed himself, are well-documented in police and fire department reports.

A witness driving in rural east Texas past midnight saw a home on fire. When he approached, he spotted a man sitting in a bluish sedan. He spoke to the man briefly, and then called 911.

“He said he was worried about the bullets that were going to fly,” the man told the 911 operator, who said, “OK. We’ll send someone right out.”

By the time authorities arrived, the man in the sedan was dead, the victim of a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head. After putting out the fire, the investigators found first one gunshot victim in the house, and then another, both burned but identifiable. The man in the vehicle was identified as Paul Dome, 73. The first body found in the house was that of Vivian Dome, 85, his wife of about 20 years. The second body was that of Willard Landry, 61, Vivian’s son. Both had been dead for days before the fire, and had begun to decompose in the Texas heat.

Jackee, with Beilinson and his production team in tow, traveled to Texas, to see the man who had been born Clarence Crouch. Jackee sorted through her father’s belongings that had survived the fire and puzzled over the evidence at the scene. Her father had used a fire extinguisher to prevent the blaze from spreading from the house to a nearby business, which seemed like a decent thing to do. On the other hand, he had killed his wife and stepson, which didn’t. Or maybe that’s complicated too, because the stepson had terminal cancer and the wife was unwell.

One of the materials Jackee found was a 1,000-page autobiography, titled *Hate and Discontent*, that her father had written while he was in prison. The story started with his childhood in Louisiana. He was born in 1940 to a single mother who was deaf and mute. The two communicated with American Sign Language. Young Butch Crouch started getting into trouble at a very young age, and he did time in a notorious juvenile detention facility called Boys Town. He ran away for good when he was a teenager, and built a rap sheet that included burglary, rape, theft and assault. At age 18 in 1958, Butch stabbed a young man, almost killing him. About a year later, he was found guilty and sentenced to five years in Huntsville Prison in Texas for attempted murder.

Jackee’s father wrote about how he and a friend later founded a motorcycle gang in Texas because, while in prison, the sound of motorcycles passing outside had given them both a sense of freedom.

Butch recounted being introduced to and recruited by Sonny Barger, who founded the first Hell’s Angels chapter in Oakland, California. Butch joined the Hell’s Angels in California and then helped run clubs in various parts of the

Note & Discontent

If someone were to ask how I got involved in motorcycle gangs in the first place, I guess the answer would be that it all started while I was doing a 6 year sentence, in the Texas prison.

About six months before I got out in Oct. '62. The guy in the next bunk, Bobby Dean, who I had gotten tight with. Noticed it first and soon we took it. We were on the Wynne Farm just outside of Huntsville. Which was a big building on a hill, just off the highway. Our bunks were next to the window and we could hear and see this guy on a Harley, as he went back and forth to work each day. He had some real nice pipes on that old Hog and the sound would echo across and into the window. As he would go through the gears, it sounded like he was talking to us. It became like music to us. The sound of freedom as he would sometimes go through gears slow and easy. Then some mornings he would just get on it all the way down the highway. We would listen as he would ease a gear, then get mad and slam it in. When he did this, he would really get it on. We know he was doing it for us because there wasn't a stop light or any reason for him to stop out front. But he would stop and then take off again. Scratching rubber in second gear just for us. He didn't do this every day, only once or twice a week. Sometimes he would just rack his pipes as he passed. But every day we would be there at 6:00 am and 5:00 pm, listening at the window.

By the time I got out, Bobby and me had made plans to get Hogs as soon as we got out. So when I got out and he got out eight months later. I had me a 1 1/2 man chopper and a 51 man waiting for him. Which had cost me a total of \$159.50 for both of them. I had paid \$9.50 for a garage full of basket cases and put the '62 together out of it. His was a stroker (80) so it had cost more. Some kid had it put together by a shop and first time out. He had broke his leg and his mother cut it in the paper. We were the first to show up and she just said 'Dive me what you got and get it out of the yard.'

Neither Bobby or me had ever rode before we got out. But by the time he got out, I was shitting and getting it through ever gear. I was sure glad I got out first, because I know I would have never lived through the wreck he had, as he tried to keep up with me. But after cleaning out few ditches and bouncing off a few cars. Bobby took the lead with that stroker and was always out front.

Another promise we made ourselves before we got out. Was that we weren't going back like everybody else seem to do. I had gotten the five years for assault to murder. I had cut up this guy named Bonnie Ellison at a party one night. It was in Oct of '58 and I was 18 and running with about ten other guys. Guess you could have called us a gang. We were always fighting with the mexicans and hanging out together. Which most of them went to the joint before I got out. Some of them are still there. So by the time I went home I had a plan. Everybody in the joint seem to be there for the same thing; Hobbory, Dope, Burglary and Checks. But all the time I was there I only knew of two guys who were in the joint for Pimpin'. There was a lot of Pimps there but they all seem to be in for other charges. So I started a trick book by asking them where all the house's were and hotels and what the porters names were. So besides the bike, I also had Bobby a whore to work by the time he got out. A Mexican whore by the name of Wanda. But as Bobby's luck would have it, she went to the man and signed statements on him. After he started fuckin around with her little sister who was 16. This took all of the money that our other whores could make for six months. To beat this case. Then one night when we were out at a bar. Bobby walked outside and seen the keys in a '58 chevy. We was crazy about those 409s and took off without even saying anything. He got busted in Louisiana and got two years for it.

So while Bobby was doing time in Louisiana, I started running as many whores as I could find. Which Houston was full of them and it was nothing to find some dirty lee in a bar. Buy her some clothes and spot her in a house or hotel downtown. With the same old promise of her working long enough to get enough for us to open up a bar. Near Fort Polk in Louisiana, there was eight house's. Fort Polk was a basic training base. So at the first of the month each month, there would be over

Butch Crouch wrote a long memoir of his life in motorcycle gangs and as a criminal. This page tells of his early involvement with the gangs.

Ohio. Two investigations with ground-penetrating radar have been carried out, without success yet. The investigation is ongoing.)

Suddenly, instead of having almost no information about her father, Jackee was reading his life's story and hearing his voice in her head as she did so. The casual violence of her father shocked her, especially as directed at women, who almost seemed disposable to him. The trove of documents and footage stunned Beilinson. He produced a 5-minute teaser, but never found enough cash to produce a full documentary.

Beilinson talked about the story with a friend named Zak Levitt, who produced Peabody Award-nominated true crime documentary podcasts. Levitt met with Jackee, and the two clicked. Jackee signed an agreement with C13 Originals, a division of podcasting company Cadence13, and Levitt threw himself into the project.

None of this happened quickly. It often seemed as if nothing was happening at all, like maybe a podcast or documentary about Jackee's life was just another one of her dramatic and fantastical tales. Except it was true. As Jackee worked a series of casino jobs in the Billings area and raised three children of her own, the podcast came together. Levitt and his team developed and wrote a series of episodes for a show under the title, "Relative Unknown." Levitt hired Jackee to narrate her own story, which she did.

"I haven't listened, because I hate the sound of my own voice," Jackee says. It was incredible for her to read the script though, because she had never put all the pieces of her father's and her own life together into one cohesive narrative. The whole experience was shocking and raw. The podcast includes recordings of her father speaking in court and to a U.S. Senate committee. She listened to them and read the transcripts. She also listened to an audio recording of an interview with a Pennsylvania reporter who has spent decades investigating the challenges and failings of the witness protection program. In the process, Jackee articulated her own personal mission.

"I want every child in witness protection to have a point person to help them navigate the system, to help them get mental health care and support, because it's not easy, and a lot of these kids have simply fallen out of sight," she says. "My dad testified in front of the Senate. Why can't I?"

country before ending up in Cleveland in the late 1960s. His story includes frank descriptions of how the clubs engaged in murder, prostitution, theft, drug-trafficking and sex crimes. Numerous newspaper accounts and court documents from that era corroborate his account.

In 1971, the Cleveland Hell's Angels battled a rival motorcycle club at the Polish Women's Club. Butch stabbed a man to death in a melee that left five men dead and 31 wounded, and in which 85 men were arrested and 46 indicted. Butch was convicted of first-degree murder, but received only two years' probation and time served. In his manuscript, Butch claimed that his light sentence was a result of a bribe paid by the club to a Cuyahoga County judge.

Over the next several years, Butch committed at least one additional murder. He shot a 17-year-old boy in the driveway of a house that had supposedly harbored an enemy of the Hell's Angels. During those years, Butch said he also helped dispose of numerous bodies, including that of a girlfriend of a Hell's Angel whose boyfriend had shot her in the head during an argument. (Jackee has allowed researchers to comb through her father's papers. About a year ago, those researchers found a map that appeared to show the location of another body, the victim of an unsolved murder, buried in northern



THE FIRST EPISODE OF "RELATIVE UNKNOWN" WENT live on Cadence13's podcast platform on August 10, 2020. A press release announced it as "a real-life tale of murder, mayhem, crime and family secrets."

Jackee suddenly had a new identity, this time as a true crime icon. She hustled to publicize the podcast. She did virtual question-and-answer sessions on Reddit, where she answered inquiries both inane and insightful. She traveled to Austin for live events at CrimeCon in 2021 and throughout this time answered phone calls from reporters all across the country, as well as from at least a dozen adults who, like her, had entered the program as children. Within a year, her podcast had been downloaded more than 4 million times. It was incredible.

To Jackee, sometimes it seems as if all she received from the witness security program was an endless web of lies. She's not convinced that it made her safe, although she definitely believes that some people need it. A few years ago, after she had broken her cover publicly, she traveled to Cleveland. She was scared, but decided to meet with some of the men she had called "uncle" as a child. The aging motorcycle gangsters from the old Cleveland club assured her that she and her siblings and mother had never been the targets of their anger. Their dreams of violent vengeance had been reserved solely for her father.

People started asking her for money, assuming that the podcast meant she was rich. It doesn't. "I'm living paycheck to paycheck like everybody else," she says.

Jackee wants to publish her father's story as a book. She harbors the hope of turning her own story into a film documentary. She has also been hired as a consultant to an LA-based archive of motorcycle gang memorabilia and records.

She hasn't yet fully turned her search for herself into full-time gainful employment, but she still might manage to make it work out.

On a recent evening in Billings, while the Pioneer League's Mustangs played a home game, Jackee wandered across the Rims above town and then sat to look over the city she has come to call home.

"I used to hate it here in Billings," she says. "But this is my place now, these are my people!"

At the close of her podcast, she urges anyone who's struggling with issues of identity or trauma to keep trying. "I tell people, 'Never let your light go out.'"

Maybe that's the best way to sum up her life's work, she says. It's a message for others, but it's also a mantra she repeats for herself. At one point, as the sky transformed into a purplish hue, lights seemed to pop and float above the baseball field. When Jackee looked at the photos taken by a photographer for this story, she saw herself with the floating lights and almost burst into tears.

"I love it! Those are the lights! Don't ever let them go out!" she says, and then, minutes later, she had to head home. In a few days she was scheduled to speak to a bunch of lawyers at an American Bar Association meeting across the state. This is her life now. It's still a struggle, but she's not ready to quit. ❏



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