


Sharon Weeks pauses while speaking about the killing of her sister and niece to journalists at the Capitol in Salt Lake City on Sept. 15, 2021. Weeks' sister, Brenda Lafferty, and Brenda's 15-month-old daughter, Erica, were killed by brothers Ron and Dan Lafferty, Brenda's brothers-in-law, in 1984. | Spenser Heaps, Deseret News

Exclusive: The real Brenda Lafferty is lost in ‘Under the Banner of Heaven’ series, her sister says

Series is ‘absolute fiction,’ Sharon Wright Weeks says, while the real story is less about religion and more about ‘jealousy and revenge’

By Katie McKellar |



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When Sharon Wright Weeks, the sister and aunt of Brenda and Erica Lafferty, found out last year along with everyone else that the limited TV series adapted from Jon Krakauer’s book “Under the Banner of Heaven” would be airing, she braced herself.

She knows the vicious cycle all too well. She and her family have lived it for decades. The morbid fascination with the “infamous” Lafferty murders lives on, overshadowing 24-year-old Brenda and 15-month-old Erica’s memories with blood and gore.

Weeks — now a vocal advocate against the death penalty in Utah — blames that obsession in large part on the heightened media attention that locks on capital punishment cases. Today, almost 40 years after Brenda’s and Erica’s lives were stolen, their family is yet again submerged in a media frenzy as each new episode of “Under the Banner of Heaven” airs.

“I knew it was coming. I felt a heavy feeling that my sister was going to be murdered all over again on Tuesday, April 28, at 7 p.m. Eastern Standard Time,” Weeks told the Deseret News in an exclusive interview this week. “That’s what it felt like.”

Weeks understood the dramatized “Under the Banner of Heaven” series would ignite more curiosity and flood her with questions. She expected that. But what she didn’t expect was just how far the show would stray from reality. And how frustrated she’d be with the damage done to Brenda’s memory.

“This series, it’s absolute fiction,” Weeks said.

So Weeks wants to set the record straight. She wants the show’s viewers to differentiate fact from fiction. She wants them to know who Brenda truly was — and what the show gets wrong about her sister’s memory, her personality, and even her relationship with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

“I’m frustrated,” Weeks said. “I’m frustrated with how it leads people. It doesn’t lead people to the truth or the reality of what happened.”

Brenda Lafferty holds her daughter, Erica Lafferty, on Sunday, June 5, 1983, about one year before they were murdered. | Weeks family photo

Brenda is ‘being used’

The series latches onto Krakauer’s book’s controversial take that “the roots of (Ron and Dan’s) crime lie deep in the history” of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Along the way, Weeks said the show sweeps Brenda up into that larger “agenda” against the church, even though she said Brenda “absolutely loved” her faith.

“It’s disappointing that she’s being used,” Weeks said. “It’s not hard to see that (writer Dustin Lance Black) does not look kindly on the religion.”

It’s no surprise that the TV series highlights Ron and Dan Lafferty’s fundamentalist religious and political beliefs. But, even though the Lafferty brothers were excommunicated for their extreme views before they committed their crimes, it paints the church in a similar broad brush — while ignoring what Weeks said is the real story behind Brenda and Erica’s murders.

While national headlines labeled the Lafferty murders as “religious killings,” Weeks said anyone who paid attention to the court cases — especially the 1996 retrial — would know prosecutors accused Ron Lafferty of using his religious views as a cover for what was really a “crime of passion.”

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Dan Lafferty testifies at brother Ron Lafferty's retrial on April 2, 1996. | Stuart Johnson, Deseret News

In court, Dan Lafferty said he was fulfilling the “revelation” Ron claimed to have received, calling for the “removal” of Brenda, Erica and two church leaders. Prosecutors said Ron Lafferty used the “revelation” as an excuse, and the killings were revenge for encouragement Brenda gave to Diana Lafferty, who divorced Ron in 1983.

That's what the series misses while focusing on religious extremes, Weeks said: The real story about how "dangerous" human emotions of "jealousy and revenge" can be.

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- Utah statewide Domestic Violence Hotline: 800-897-LINK (5465) and udvc.org
- 24-hour Salt Lake victim advocate hotline: 801-580-7969
- National Domestic Violence Hotline: 800-799-7233

"There are extreme people in every aspect of every situation," Weeks said, religious or not. While Ron and Dan Lafferty were indeed "fanatical" about their small, splinter religious group called the School of the Prophets, Weeks said "religion was such a small part" of Ron and Dan Lafferty's views, which she said were "way more extreme governmentally."

"Religion had nothing to do with the reason Brenda and Erica were murdered," Weeks said. "I guess you have to go through the court process and listen to the prosecutor tell the story about why it wasn't a religious killing. Why Ron Lafferty was not incompetent. And how the crimes were determined to be a crime of passion, murders of revenge, and it had nothing to do with religion."

Yet, "Under the Banner of Heaven" series writer Dustin Lance Black has "spun it" to suggest the church "creates violent people," Weeks said.

To draw a singular line from Brenda's and Erica's murder to some violent

chapters of the church's past makes for great storytelling, Weeks said. However, she said it washes away who Brenda really was and what really happened.

And religious history experts have said that approach is problematic because it ignores the church's full history while focusing only on the extremes.

“My concern is, I think a lot of people will see (“Under the Banner of Heaven”) and see it as actual history when it has the contours of history, but there’s a lot of departures from actual history,” Barbara Jones Brown, former executive director of the Mormon History Association, told KSL-TV.

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Despite her misgivings with the series, Weeks wants to be clear she doesn’t harbor ill feelings toward Black, saying she understands he had every right to do what he wanted with his own project because Krakauer sold the rights.

She also said she doesn’t want to “diminish anybody’s suffering or experience” within the church, which is what Black is also highlighting with the TV series.

“It’s his truth,” she said. “And he wants that to be shown.”

Black has been open about his difficult experience with the church. In his 2009 acceptance speech for winning the Oscar for original screenplay for “Milk,” he talked about how he moved from a “conservative Mormon” home to California, and the story of gay activist Harvey Milk “gave me hope” to one day “live my life openly as who I am.” Today, Black and his husband, 2020 gold medalist British diver Tom Daley, are among the world’s most famous gay couples.

Black has also been open about how when he first read Krakauer’s “Under the Banner of Heaven,” it shined a light on parts of church history that he’d never examined. “It was formative to me,” he said of the book to The New York Times last month.

Brenda and Erica Lafferty's grave in Twin Falls, Idaho, is pictured on Monday, May 31, 2021. Brenda and Erica Lafferty were laid to rest together, with Erica laying in the crook of Brenda Lafferty's right arm. | Weeks family photo

However, he also said the series doesn't only reflect his own experiences, but mostly seeks to highlight perceived problems women have faced within the church and that "gender ought not determine destiny."

Black did not immediately return a request for comment on Wednesday.

What 'Under the Banner of Heaven' gets wrong about Brenda

One of the biggest issues Weeks has with the series takes place in Episode 3.

Weeks said she was particularly disappointed to see one of Brenda's most sacred, intimate and private moments — her temple wedding — depicted in a "creepy" light, even though in reality Brenda "loved every bit of it."

"It was a personal, beautiful experience that she absolutely cherished," Weeks said. "She loved every bit of it. She didn't think it was weird. She didn't think it was creepy."

Weeks, who along with Brenda was raised as a Latter-day Saint by “pragmatic” parents in Idaho who didn’t take their religion to extremes, said she’s not active in the church these days, but she knows how “sacred” the temple ceremony is, and she wanted to protect her sister’s memory from being “exploited” in that setting. Weeks said her mother raised her and her sister to be fully prepared for the ceremony, so they knew exactly what to expect.

“I feel like they betrayed Brenda, and that I wasn’t able to prevent that from happening,” Weeks said. “I had no idea they would show her in that setting.”

Weeks is also frustrated Brenda seems to be depicted as a religious fanatic, when in reality she said she had a rather normal relationship with her faith. She said even the protagonist in the series — the fictional Latter-day Saint detective Jeb Pyre, played by Andrew Garfield — speaks like a zealot. She has similar gripes with how Brenda’s husband, Allen, is portrayed.

Brenda Lafferty, 18, is pictured during her first year away at college in 1979. She attended University of Idaho in Moscow, Idaho. | Weeks family photo

“She didn’t talk like that,” Weeks said. “When you watch the show, they say ‘Heavenly Father’ like 30 times in the first 10 minutes. And she just didn’t talk like that.”

Weeks doesn’t have anything negative to say about Daisy Edgar-Jones, who portrays Brenda Lafferty in the miniseries. She applauds Edgar-Jones acting and calls her character “adorable,” “beautiful” and “cute.”

But, the character on the screen? “That’s not Brenda,” Weeks said. “I do not

recognize her at all in any of the show.”

Brenda was “tall and athletic.” She was “gorgeous.” She was “stunning,” Weeks said. She described how her sister, a former beauty queen, would never leave the house without her hair done up in spectacular curls. Like many other girls in the '70s and '80s, Brenda would never be “caught dead” without skin-tight bell bottom jeans and always wore high heels to school, Weeks said.

Brenda’s confidence and strong-willed personality does at times shine through Edgar-Jones’ character, portraying a “woman before her time.” But Weeks said Brenda’s personality was louder, more fun and much less muted. Weeks said Brenda would curse, laugh loudly and would never hesitate to speak her mind.

“She could burp the alphabet,” Weeks said. “The whole alphabet.”

The show, however, does accurately depict Brenda’s ambitions with broadcast reporting, Weeks said. She did indeed graduate from Brigham Young University with a degree in journalism. She anchored for KBYU, and she had bigger ambitions.

“She wanted to be the next Diane Sawyer,” Weeks said.

But the scene where a BYU broadcast professor locks Brenda’s character in the studio and makes a suggestive pass at her, that’s total fiction, Weeks said.

“All women ... are approached sexually throughout their life. Brenda was no different. I know people left notes on her cars and her locker ... but a BYU professor never crossed the line with Brenda,” Weeks said. “She loved all of her colleagues. She loved her experience at BYU.”

If he had? Weeks said the real Brenda’s reaction would have been very different.

“She would have punched somebody,” Weeks said. “She wouldn’t have sat there and calmly talked to somebody if she felt threatened.”

However, that’s not to say some women haven’t had negative experiences at BYU or other institutions, Weeks adds. “But it didn’t happen to her. That did not happen to Brenda.”

Weeks said she did consult — very early on — for the series. Way back in 2011, after she first learned Krakauer sold the rights to the book, Weeks said Black came to her home in St. George to talk. She said she “shared everything” and “he promised he wouldn’t even begin to write Brenda until he felt he knew her.” After meeting with her, Weeks said Black also went to Idaho and spent several days meeting her parents.

This was when the show was initially envisioned as a feature film, Weeks said. Along the way, as the story was developed and stretched into a seven-episode series, Brenda’s essence seemed to have gotten lost.

“I wished it wouldn’t have come to fruition,” Weeks said of the show. “Because it’s painful, not just for me but for members of our family.”

It still hurts to see people “capitalize” and make money off of dramatizing Brenda’s murder, Weeks said. So far in the series, she’s glad to see the violent act itself absent — though the bloody aftermath of the murders was the first scene in the show.

Considering herself a keeper and protector of Brenda and Erica’s memories, Weeks said she was concerned about how it would be depicted — the final, most intimate moments of their lives. Weeks said she hopes people keep that in mind as they watch.

“I don’t want her to be embarrassed. I don’t want her to be vulnerable,” Weeks said. And the scene of a murder is probably “the most vulnerable that anyone could ever be.”

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