

**BY SKIP HOLLANDSWORTH**  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY MATT RAINWATERS

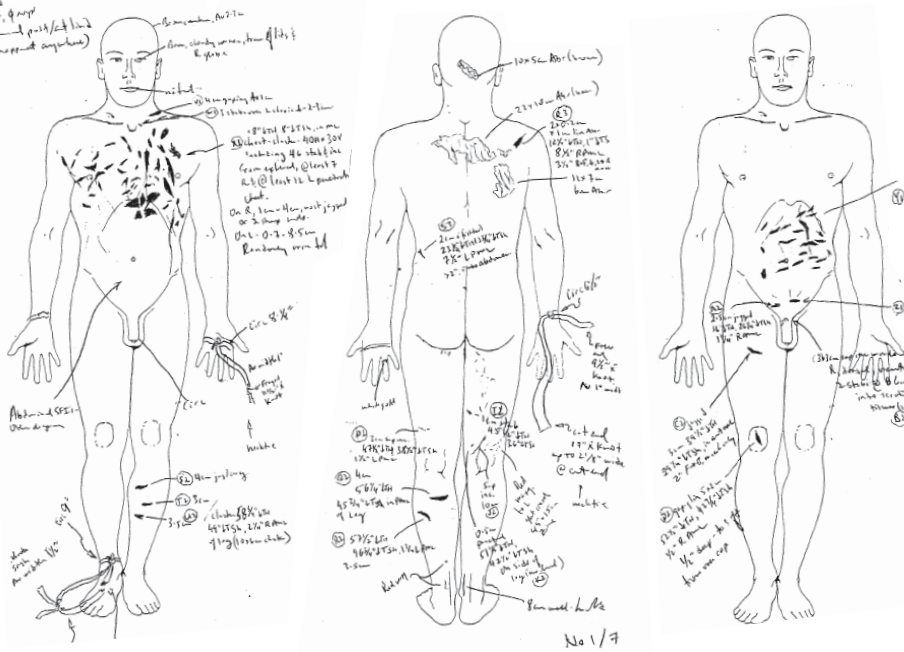
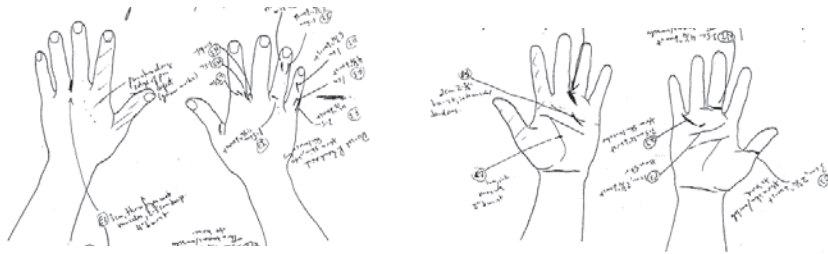
That's how many times  
Susan Wright, a shy  
suburban mother of two,  
stabbed her husband in  
their bed before burying him  
in the backyard. In a wild  
trial that had all of Houston  
buzzing, she was convicted  
of murder and sent to prison.  
But what the jury didn't  
know six years ago  
may soon set her free.



**PREVIOUS SPREAD:**  
SUSAN WRIGHT, PHOTOGRAPHED AT THE HOBBY UNIT, IN MARLIN, ON NOVEMBER 23, 2009.  
**THIS PAGE: WRIGHT DOESN'T DENY KILLING HER HUSBAND, BUT SHE CLAIMS SHE DID SO IN SELF-DEFENSE AFTER YEARS OF ABUSE. OPPOSITE: DRAWINGS FROM THE AUTOPSY REPORT SHOW NUMEROUS STAB WOUNDS ON THE BODY; SUSAN AND JEFFREY WITH KAILY (LEFT) AND BRADLY IN AN UNDATED FAMILY PHOTO.**



**SUSAN WRIGHT, THE BLUE-EYED BUTCHER OF THE HOUSTON SUBURBS, IS STILL** a lovely young woman, still as polite and well-mannered as she was seven years ago, when she grabbed a knife, stabbed her husband at least 193 times, and buried him facedown in their backyard. ¶ “Hi,” she said softly as she walked into the visiting room of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice’s Hobby Unit, in Marlin, shaking my hand and ducking her head shyly. She was wearing dark-red Covergirl lipstick, which she keeps in a box for special occasions. She smelled nice too; just before my arrival, she had taken a couple perfume samples from a fashion magazine she receives in the mail and rubbed them across her neck. Her hair, blond at the time of the murder, had returned to its natural auburn shade. It was still damp from the shower she had been allowed to take an hour earlier. She settled into a chair at a table and nervously began to smooth out the wrinkles in her white uniform. ¶ “How are you?” I asked.



“Oh, I have nothing to complain about,” she said. “I live in a dormitory area with other women, and I have a photo of my children on a wall next to my pillow. Every morning I wake up and look at them.” For a moment, she stared at the floor and pressed her lips together. “Can you believe my son, Bradley, has turned eleven, and my little Kaily is almost eight?”

Bradly was only four and Kaily was not even two on January 18, 2003, when a lawyer named Neal Davis walked into the district attorney’s office and said that he represented a client who’d led him to believe that a body could be found at a small patio home in the heart of the White Oak Bend subdivision, in northwest Harris County. He refused to give any additional details, claiming attorney-client privilege. When police officers arrived at the address, they discovered the nude body of 34-year-old Jeffrey Wright, a 220-pound carpet and flooring salesman. He was partially visible in his grave because the Wright family’s dog had dug him up. Jeffrey had been stabbed all over the front of

his body. Neckties were knotted around his wrists, and a bathrobe sash was wrapped around one of his ankles. Inside the house, blood was splattered throughout the master bedroom, including on the bed, the floors, the walls, the ceiling, and the ironing board.

Investigators called Davis and asked if his client happened to be Jeffrey’s wife, Susan, who was then 26 years old. Yes, Davis replied, but she would not be speaking to them. She was in the psychiatric ward of Ben Taub General Hospital, babbling to herself. She believed Jeffrey was roaming the hallways, trying to find her so that he could beat her to death.

And thus began one of the most macabre murder cases in modern Texas history, culminating in a trial so lurid that Court TV broadcast it, gavel to gavel, across the country. CBS’s weekly true-crime program, *48 Hours Mystery*, devoted an entire show to the Wright killing; the obligatory pulp paperback, *A Wife’s Revenge*, was published about the case; and Hollywood producers came sniffing around, hoping to turn the whole saga into a made-for-television movie.

As a study in courtroom sensationalism, the drama was indeed difficult to beat—“the most exciting trial, bar none, that I’ve ever watched, the kind of thing you think only happens on *Law & Order*,” recalled Jenna Jackson, a veteran *48 Hours* producer who saw all the testimony. When Wright took the witness stand, she tearfully told jurors one horrific tale after another about the abuse she had secretly endured during her five-year marriage. Beneath her husband’s congenial, backslapping persona, she testified, was a sadistic, drug-abusing brute who’d belittled and controlled her, kicked and punched her when she didn’t do what he wanted, and sexually assaulted her whenever he felt like it. On the evening of January 13, 2003, Susan said, Jeffrey returned home from a boxing lesson high on cocaine, tried to get Bradley to box with him, popped him in the face with his fist,





**RIGHT: NEAL DAVIS REPRESENTED WRIGHT AT HER TRIAL. BELOW: BRIAN WICE BEGAN FILING APPEALS ON WRIGHT'S BEHALF IN 2004, CLAIMING IN PART THAT DAVIS HAD NOT PROVIDED ADEQUATE COUNSEL.**



and later attacked her after she told him he had to get help for his anger. He then ordered her to get into bed, where he raped her. Afterward he left for a few moments. When he returned, he was holding a butcher knife. He waved it over her head, shouting, "Die, bitch!"

"I threw my hands up, then I grabbed the knife, and I started kicking him with my right knee," Wright testified to the riveted, standing-room-only crowd. "His grasp on the knife loosened just a little bit and I got it from him." She said she first stabbed him in the neck, and then she kept stabbing him, because "I knew the second that I stopped that he was going to kill me."

At one point during Wright's frenzy, Bradley knocked on the bedroom door. Despite the fact that she had already stabbed Jeffrey multiple times, she was convinced that he was going to get up and come after her. So Wright said she tied her husband's right arm to the bed with a necktie before hiding the knife and walking Bradley back to his room. Then she got another knife from the kitchen, thinking Jeffrey might have found the first one. "I knew he was going to kill me," she said. "And I was so scared because I didn't want to die. I started stabbing him again." She said she began stabbing his legs for all the times he'd kicked her, and she stabbed his penis "for all the times that he made me have sex and I didn't want to."

Finally, she testified, she cut the tie connecting his hand to the bedpost and pulled him off the bed. His shoulder hit the nightstand, spilling the wax from a red candle Jeffrey had lit earlier that evening onto his body. She brought a dolly into the bedroom, propped him on it, used another necktie to fasten his left hand to the dolly, and used the sash of her bathrobe to secure his feet. Then she rolled Jeffrey outside to a hole that he had dug months earlier to install a fountain. She crammed his six-foot-two-inch body into it and covered him with dirt. But, she insisted, she still believed her husband was alive. She said she sat on the sofa for the rest of the night with the knife in her hands, "and I watched for Jeff to get up, because I was afraid the second I went to sleep he was going to get up and come after me again."

Over and over, Wright told the jury that on the night of the killing, she had experienced some sort of mental breakdown, which lasted for days. She explained that the reason she didn't initially tell anyone about what she had done was because "my brain still wouldn't accept it. He was still alive and I was scared of him." It wasn't until Saturday morning, five days after the killing, that she began to realize that "something horrible had happened."

Five-foot-four-inch Kelly Siegler, the fierce prosecutor in the Harris County district attorney's office, was having none of it. She rose

on her black high heels and told the jury that Wright had most likely lured her husband to the bed and tied him to the posts, leading him to think they were going to engage in some sexual game playing. To get him even more aroused, Siegler suggested, Wright had poured candle wax on his body. At that point, Siegler declared, Wright had pulled out her knife and turned that bedroom “into a torture chamber.” The motive? According to Siegler, Wright wanted to cash in his \$200,000 life insurance policy. “All that battered wife abuse bull was just that,” Siegler proclaimed to the jurors. “It was bull!”

In the most astonishing moment of the trial, Siegler, an attractive woman always stylishly turned out, had the bloodstained bed from the Wrights’ bedroom brought into the courtroom. A younger male prosecutor climbed onto the mattress and was tied to the posts. Wearing a tight-fitting Alberto Makali black pantsuit, Siegler took off her high heels, straddled her colleague, raised one of the actual knives that Wright had used to kill her husband, and reenacted the stabbings. (Her co-counsel didn’t participate in the reenactment because his girlfriend didn’t want Siegler writhing all over him.) The male prosecutor began to have difficulty breathing, because he had just stuck a large dip of snuff in his mouth and needed to spit. He strained at the ligatures, which were cutting off the circulation to his hands. Meanwhile, a grim-faced Siegler kept pretending to stab him.

The jurors needed only five hours to decide Wright’s fate: Dismissing her claims of self-defense, they convicted her of first-degree murder and sentenced her to 25 years in prison. “Just about everyone in Houston believed Susan Wright was a monster,” said Brian Wice, perhaps the city’s most prominent criminal appellate attorney, who had watched some of the proceedings. “Everyone believed that she was some real-life reincarnation of Sharon Stone from the first reel of *Basic Instinct*. There was just one problem. Everyone had gotten it wrong.”

In November 2004 Wice began filing a series of appeals for Wright. Working pro bono, he claimed that she had not received a fair trial. He argued that Siegler’s in-court reenactment of the stabbings was “made-for-TV nonsense.” (Before the trial even ended, a Hollywood producer had called ABC and pitched a one-hour drama series based on Siegler, about a feisty female district attorney in Houston who uses unconventional methods to beat the good ol’ boy Texas defense lawyers.)

Wice also went after Wright’s own attorneys, Neal Davis and Todd Ward, whom he described as “two well-meaning, inexperienced, ultimately overmatched lawyers.” He claimed that they’d neglected to

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**ABOVE: KELLY SIEGLER PROSECUTED THE CASE, CALLING WRIGHT A “GOOD LIAR” WHO WANTED TO CASH IN JEFFREY’S LIFE INSURANCE POLICY. LEFT: IN ONE OF THE TRIAL’S MOST ASTONISHING MOMENTS, SIEGLER REENACTED THE CRIME WHILE USING THE WRIGHTS’ BLOODSTAINED BED.**



call various witnesses to the stand who could have verified Wright's claims of abuse and that they failed to call any domestic violence experts who could have explained that Wright was suffering from what is sometimes called battered woman syndrome, a condition that afflicts some women who have been victims of prolonged abuse, leading them to believe that their only reasonable course of action is to kill their abusers. Most significantly, Wice said, they didn't call the psychologist who had evaluated Wright after the crime and found her to be in a near-psychotic state, truly convinced that Jeffrey was alive and wanted to kill her.

In early 2009, to the amazement of the entire Houston legal community, state district judge Jim Wallace, who had presided over the trial, ordered a new sentencing hearing. He wrote that though no one disputed that Wright had killed her husband, there was a "wealth of mitigating evidence not presented at the punishment stage that painted a dramatically different picture of [her] and her moral blameworthiness." The new evidence, the judge added, could very well have led the jurors to decide that Wright, who had never before been convicted of a crime, had acted as a result of what state law calls "sudden passion" arising from an "adequate cause." Such a decision may have resulted in a less severe sentence, perhaps even probation.

This past October, in an even bigger surprise, the usually prosecution-friendly Texas Court of Criminal Appeals upheld Wallace's decision by a unanimous vote. Wice, a garrulous attorney who is known for his ability to come up with a sound bite for any occasion, was rendered temporarily speechless. "The highest criminal court in the state was essentially declaring that the jurors had never gotten a chance to see the real Susan Wright," he later told me. "It was flat-out amazing."

A new jury could reconsider the sentence as early as this summer. Although the district attorney's office has not commented on the ruling, Wice hopes that prosecutors will simply drop the sentencing hearing, consider the time Wright has already served, and allow her to walk out of prison. But the scenario is not without its risks. Siegler, who is now in private practice, told me she "cannot wait" for a new jury to hear additional evidence. "I especially want that jury to hear what Susan really told the psychologist at the psychiatric ward," she added. "They're going to realize what a cold-blooded killer she is. I promise you, this time around, Susan Wright could very well be going off to prison for as long as she lives."

**“W**HEN I FIRST CAME HERE, I WOKE up in cold sweats, thinking Jeffrey was going to figure out a way to get in here,” Wright told me during our visit in November. “I know you’ll never understand it, but I was sure he was out there, just beyond the fences.” She looked at a window, her eyes filling with tears. “It took me a long time to understand that he was not coming back.”

What struck me about Wright during the first few minutes we were together was her timid, almost apologetic demeanor—the kind of behavior one might expect to find in a woman who would stay in an abusive relationship. When a small fly buzzed past my head, she leaned forward, swished it away with her hand, and said, “Oh, I’m so sorry.” At another point in the conversation, she looked over at a guard across the room and said nervously, “I hope he’s not getting upset that we’re talking for so long.” Later, when she complained about having to “go through so much crap” in her marriage, she immediately apologized for saying the word “crap.”

I could not help but wonder if she was putting on an act to impress me. In fact, Siegler had warned me that Wright would attempt to fool me with “all her battered woman’s talk.” But Susan’s older sister, Cindy, who is an assistant professor of psychology at the University of Houston-Downtown, insisted that Susan was being herself. “Even growing up, she was always less than confident,” Cindy said. “She had trouble standing up for herself. When she tried out for the drill team, some of the older girls said something mean that made her cry. She felt so devastated that she transferred to another school.”

Susan, Cindy, and their brother, Jim, were raised in an upper-middle-class home in the Champions area of northwest Harris County. Their mother was, in Cindy’s words, “the quintessential stay-at-home mom who baked meals from scratch,” and their father was a prosperous mechanical engineer with a temper. According to statements Cindy and Susan have made, he would go into rages and attack their mother; sometimes he beat the children too. “We learned to walk on eggshells,” Susan told me. “We did our best to put on a smile and make everything look normal. When he got mad, we tried not to be seen. I thought that’s what happened in every house. If you had told me every husband didn’t yell at his wife or make her feel less than dirt, I wouldn’t have believed you.”

“Why didn’t you tell the jury any of this when you testified?” I asked.

“I didn’t want to embarrass the family,” she quietly said, clasping her hands together,

perhaps to keep me from noticing how they were shaking. “I love my mother and father, and I don’t want to embarrass them.” (Their father is now bedridden, suffering from lung cancer. Their parents told *48 Hours* that the allegations of abuse were not true.)

Wright was an average student in high school, making C’s in most of her classes. She had a few boyfriends, and she told me that she did what she could to please them. “I looked for attention from boys,” she said succinctly. When one boyfriend criticized her looks, she went on a diet, dropping nineteen pounds. In her senior year, just after she’d turned eighteen, she made a decision at the encouragement of another boyfriend that utterly baffled and disturbed her sister and mother. She went to work as a dancer at a topless bar called the Gold Cup in far north Houston. After two months of dancing, she quit, though she did stay on for several more months as a waitress. “I thought I would like the attention and maybe feel better about myself,” she said, “but I was never comfortable. The money wasn’t worth it.”

After graduating from high school, she took some junior college classes, went to work at a hair salon, and in April 1997, on a trip to Galveston with a friend, met Jeffrey. She was 20, and he was 29. He brought her flowers and took her to nice restaurants and nightclubs. Not long after they met, he told her he loved her. “He was very sweet and very handsome, with beautiful brown eyes,” she said. “He met my parents and told them about his dream of someday owning his own carpeting and flooring business. I thought he was wonderful.”

At her trial Wright spent two days on the witness stand trying to explain what happened next. In February 1998 she became pregnant. According to Wright, Jeffrey told her he would be “okay” if she had an abortion. Wright worked at an orthodontist’s office and, at Jeffrey’s request, gave her paychecks to him. They married in October in a brief church ceremony. One month later, Bradley was born. At that point, said Wright, Jeffrey “became a totally and completely different person.”

She said he angrily began calling her a “fat ass” for having gained so much weight during the pregnancy. He got even angrier, she added, when she told him she had been diagnosed with postpartum depression. Jeffrey wouldn’t let her take the antidepressants a doctor had prescribed. “He said it wasn’t rocket science what women did,” Wright testified. “And that I needed to suck it up and do my job.”

Jeffrey wanted her to be a stay-at-home mom—almost literally. Wright said she could make quick trips to the grocery store and she could visit her mother, but he allowed her to

be gone only for an hour and a half. One day, she asked if she could take courses at a junior college. He refused. When she did visit the campus one night to try to enroll in an Internet course, Jeffrey was infuriated, accusing her of going there to cheat on him and calling her a “nasty whore.”

Wright said she had had no idea that Jeffrey had pleaded guilty in 1996 to a felony drug possession charge and had been placed on probation. But she began to worry about his drug use: She said he smoked marijuana almost every afternoon when he got home from work. Sometimes, after getting high, he would pick up Bradley, toss him in the air, and catch him. When she told Jeffrey one night that she was not comfortable with the way he played with Bradley, “he told me that I didn’t have the right to tell him when or how he would pick up his son. And he came at me. He threw me up against the wall and he shook me by my arms as hard as he could . . . and he began to punch me in the chest over and over again.”

Wright told the jury that the physical abuse only escalated after they moved into their patio home, in April 1999. Anything would set him off: if there was a problem with his paycheck, if a customer upset him, if the electricity bills were too high, if the house wasn’t spotless, if dinner was bad, if Bradley was too loud. And whenever Jeffrey got mad, she told the jury, “he wanted to make somebody hurt.”

She said he hit or kicked her repeatedly in the chest, in the stomach, and in the back and legs. When visits to his parents in Austin didn’t go as smoothly as he had hoped, he would yell at her on the entire drive back to Houston. “He would grab my shoulder and throw me up against the window. He would grab the back of my head and bash it against the dashboard because it was my fault.” She said that Jeffrey would even kick their sixty-pound dog and occasionally throw him across the room. (Some courtroom observers would later morbidly joke that that had to be the reason the dog dug up Jeffrey’s body and gnawed off part of his hand: It wanted revenge.)

Wright said she didn’t initially tell anyone in her family she was being beaten. “I was embarrassed, and I felt like it was my fault. I felt if I could be perfect enough and he would always be happy, then everything would be okay.” To keep her neighbors from suspecting abuse, she rarely went out of the house when she had visible bruises on her body. Nor did she ever consider going to a doctor or filing a police report. She feared that if she did, Jeffrey would only become more violent. When one of her attorneys asked why she didn’t get a divorce, she replied, “He told me if I ever left him, he was going to kill me. It’s not as simple as get-

ting a divorce. When someone hurts you that bad and they tell you that they’re going to kill you, you just can’t get up and leave.”

She said she did make one attempt to move out, in the summer of 1999, after Jeffrey had beaten her and then forced her to apologize for the attack. When he left for work, she called Cindy, who soon arrived in a U-Haul with her husband. They packed up Susan’s and Bradley’s things and drove to the home of Susan and Cindy’s parents. The next morning, Jeffrey called Susan and told her a moving van would soon be pulling up in front of the house and that she needed to put all of her belongings in the van and return home. Otherwise, he would kill either her or Bradley. She did as she was told.

Susan became pregnant again, in December 2000, but she said she miscarried after Jeffrey kicked her in the stomach. (She said he wouldn’t let her go to the hospital because he didn’t have enough money.) She became pregnant a third time and gave birth to Kaily in December 2001. Afterward, she said, she went through another bout of postpartum depression, which seemed to make Jeffrey angrier than ever. He also began to see other women through an Internet dating service, and he ended up giving Susan herpes. “He told me if I was a better wife he wouldn’t need other women,” she said.

By the fall of 2002, she told the jury, Jeffrey had changed jobs and wasn’t making much money. His behavior became even more erratic. One night, she said, he drunkenly stumbled into the house and urinated on Kaily’s bed. He bought an air rifle, which he told his wife he needed in order to keep the family in line, and later hit her with it. On another occasion, he threw bricks at her in the backyard. On New Year’s Day 2003, he told Susan, “Happy fucking New Year, bitch. That will be your last.”

Two weeks later, on the night of January 13, 2003, he came home from his boxing lesson and punched Bradley in the face so hard that the child fell back into a love seat. When Bradley began whimpering, Jeffrey called him a sissy. And that’s when all hell broke loose.

**T**HE FIRST PROBLEM FOR THE JURORS was that there was almost no testimony corroborating anything Wright had said. One neighbor had said that he saw Jeffrey angrily grab Susan’s arm several times. A couple friends testified that they had noticed a black half circle under her eye, but they said she quickly explained it away, claiming that Bradley had accidentally hit her with a toy. One of Wright’s best friends, Jamie Darr-Hall, said that Wright seemed ter-



rified of Jeffrey: She would always cut short their afternoons at the park, frantically saying she had to get home in time to cook dinner for Jeffrey to avoid risking his wrath. Darr-Hall acknowledged, however, that only once did Wright mention that Jeffrey had hit her, after an argument the two of them had had on his birthday.

When Wright's mother took the stand, she said that she had seen several bruises and black eyes. She added poignantly, "I have heard her cry out in pain when I tried to hug her because her back was hurt so bad." But like the others, she could not provide any independent evidence, such as a medical report, that Wright was a battered wife.

Meanwhile, Siegler had various friends and co-workers of Jeffrey's testify that he was a "great guy" who'd "do anything for you." One friend described Jeffrey and Susan's marriage as "very happy." Jeffrey's boss said the Wrights were "a *Leave It to Beaver* family." Jeffrey himself, he added, was "stable" and "churchgoing" and "a very proud father." Yes, a couple guys said they knew Jeffrey used to have problems with drugs, but all that was in the past. His getting married, one friend said, "changed his life . . . for the positive."

Siegler then turned the tables on Wright, badgering her in cross-examination about her two-month stint as a topless dancer and suggesting that she was a sexual sadist who loved to practice bondage and tease her husband with candle wax. "What did you say to him to get him undressed, to get him nude, to get him up on the bed?" Siegler snarled. "And what did you say to him as you tied up his hands so tight there to the bed as you made love to him, Mrs. Wright?"

Siegler was just getting started. She nearly laughed out loud over Wright's claim that she was able to grab the knife, knee Jeffrey in the groin, and then push him off of her. "You managed to stab a guy who outweighs you by one hundred pounds and who was so much stronger than you?" she sarcastically drawled. "And when you stabbed him the 56th or the 89th time or the 158th time, was your arm getting tired?"

As for Wright's remarks that she kept stabbing Jeffrey in a sheer panic, convinced he was going to get up and come after her, Siegler snapped, "And in this state of sheer panic that you were in . . . you were able to stop when you heard that knock at the door, get off of Jeff, answer the door, grab Bradley, walk him down the hall, put him back in his room, shut the door, go get another knife, go back into the bedroom, and start stabbing some more. Is that right?"

And Siegler simply made mincemeat of Wright's numerous statements that she was in

a "fog" in the days after the killing, so traumatized that she didn't know what she was doing. Siegler claimed that Wright knew exactly what she was doing—attempting to cover up the murder. Siegler noted that a few days after the killing, Wright had shown up at a constable's office to ask for a protective order against Jeffrey. (She had told the constable that her husband had beaten her and Bradley and then left, and she was worried about what would happen when he returned.) Why, Siegler asked, didn't she just go ahead and admit that she had stabbed him to death in self-defense? Was she trying to send police down a rabbit trail with her request for a protective order, hoping they would think Jeffrey had disappeared?

Wright, however, kept insisting that she was still unable to fathom that her husband was really dead. "I couldn't even begin to handle that in my head," she told Siegler. "There is no way that my brain was even processing that. To me it was real, that Jeffrey had left right after we had argued."

But Siegler also noted that while Wright's children stayed at Cindy's home, Wright ripped up parts of the bloody carpet, attempted to get rid of other bloodstains on the floor with bleach, dragged the blood-soaked mattress to the backyard, and painted the blood-spattered walls. Wright said she cleaned the house only because she believed Jeffrey was still alive. "I had to clean the house," she testified. "It was dirty. And Jeff was already going to be so angry when he came home that I had to make the house perfect so he wouldn't be angrier at me."

Well, Siegler asked, why did she drive to a nursery and buy several bags of topsoil, which she poured over Jeffrey's grave to keep him covered? "I thought that I had to weigh him down because I was afraid he was going to get up," Wright said. "And I knew that when he got up he was going to be very angry."

Siegler simply shook her head in disgust. "And one of those days in your lucid moments, when you weren't in the fog, what were you going to do with your husband laying there in your patio where you were raising your children? Dig him up again someday and put him somewhere else?"

In her closing arguments, Siegler told the jurors that Wright's story was nothing more than "an insult to your intelligence." Even worse, she declared, were Wright's attempts to say she had killed Jeffrey in self-defense. "Really?" Siegler thundered. "Self-defense would have been, once she got him tied up, running out the door for all she was worth with her babies." Siegler pointed at Wright and called her a "red-handed, confirmed, documented liar. And she's a good liar. And she's a good ac-

tress. And don't you forget that for a minute."

**B**RIAN WICE HAD SAT THROUGH MUCH of the Wright trial as part of his second job. He provides commentary for a Houston television station about high-profile trials, and he found himself outraged by Siegler's portrayal of Wright and what he called "her blatant attempts to mislead the jury with myths, misconceptions, and stereotypes about battered women." But he was almost as concerned about the way Wright's defense had handled the case. After her conviction, he persuaded her and her family to let him file her appeal.

Wice quickly learned that ten months before the trial, a detective from the Harris County Sheriff's Office had taken a sworn statement from Misty McMichael, who is now married to former University of Texas and Chicago Bears football star Steve McMichael. In 1989 she worked as a stripper at the Colorado Bar and Grill, in Houston. There, she told the detective, she met Jeffrey Wright, whom she called a "big-time spender." They began dating and soon were engaged.

Misty said she moved with Jeffrey to Austin, where he stayed with his parents and she lived in a small apartment. Initially, she said, he was charming. But he eventually became abusive, especially after he had been drinking. Misty said at first he verbally abused her, then he threw her down the apartment's spiral staircase. He backhanded her across the face. And in one particularly violent episode at a bar, he swiped at a glass on the table, breaking it and sending a shard into Misty's chin. She filed a police report, and Jeffrey was arrested for assault with bodily injury. Misty later explained to Wice that she asked police to drop the charges because she feared that Jeffrey would do something worse to her after he got out of jail. But even after that episode, Jeffrey continued to abuse her, and when he would leave her at night to go out and, she suspected, meet other women, he'd lock her inside the apartment. Finally, Misty said, she escaped and fled to Houston. Jeffrey eventually found her, but by then she had another boyfriend, and she said Jeffrey didn't bother her again.

Misty appeared to be a woman who could corroborate Wright's claims of abuse—one who, in Wice's words, showed Jeffrey to be "a serial abuser with a Jekyll-Hyde personality." But Wright's original defense attorneys later claimed that they hadn't been able to contact Misty. ("I didn't know what she would say on the stand, since she did not return my calls after I left numerous messages," Davis said in a hearing related to Wright's appeal.) They

also admitted that they were worried the jury would not believe Misty because of what Davis described as her “questionable character,” including allegations of drug use. Wice, however, said he got her on the phone without any trouble. “Sure, she had baggage,” he said, “but that should not have prevented the jury from hearing her story.”

**W**ICE WAS EQUALLY FLABBERGASTED that Wright’s attorneys had not called a single expert on domestic violence to the stand who might have been able to explain to the jury exactly what had led Susan to commit such an unfathomable act of violence. When most people read about a woman killing her abusive husband, the first question they usually ask is, Why did the woman not just pick up and leave? Did she really feel that trapped? Or did all the trauma she had been forced to endure send her spiraling into some sort of mental breakdown? Did her mind simply short-circuit because of the violence, not unlike that of a soldier who suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder?

Researchers are still debating exactly what happens. But a growing body of evidence suggests that at least some women in such situations become practically frozen with fear. They lose almost all sense of self-esteem, thinking that if they only behave a certain way, they can bring peace to their marriages. Terrified about further angering their husbands, they often don’t tell anyone about what they are enduring, including members of their own family, and they wait until bruises have cleared to get a medical checkup.

But as the abuse continues, the women become more and more distraught. In rare instances, something happens to a woman that is so frightening—perhaps she or one of her children receives a particularly brutal beating—that she suddenly lashes out, convinced that her only logical option is to kill her abuser. When Wice sent the trial transcripts to Toby Myers, a Houston social worker who specializes in family violence issues, and Shelby Moore, a Harvard-educated professor at Houston’s South Texas College of Law who has written extensively in law journals on battered women and crime, both of them said that Wright clearly believed that she was committing a reasonable act to save herself and her children. In her affidavit, Myers called Wright “a classic example” of a battered wife, who lived “in a state of constant, anticipatory terror” of Jeffrey.

Davis said that he didn’t want to overwhelm the jury with too much expert testimony. “You know, there’s only so much psychobabble

a jury can handle,” he said. His co-counsel, Ward, added that he was not impressed with experts. “There are experts on how to sharpen a pencil,” he said. “Battered woman syndrome, to me, was not rocket science.”

Wice claimed that the young lawyers could not have been more mistaken. Across the United States, he noted, appellate courts have consistently held that expert testimony is necessary to defend battered women who kill their husbands. Though such testimony rarely leads to acquittals, it does give juries a chance to understand such women—and perhaps sentence them to less time in prison or recommend probation.

Indeed, Wice declared, without such testimony in the Wright case, Siegler was given “free rein” to perpetuate myths about severely abused women, such as her frequent statements that Wright could have grabbed her children and left Jeffrey whenever she wanted. “Attempting to defend this kind of case without a battered woman expert is like doing *Hamlet* without Hamlet,” Wice said.

**T**O WICE, THE MOST GLARING MISTAKE the defense lawyers made was their refusal to call Dr. Jerome Brown. After Davis had Wright admitted to the psychiatric ward of Ben Taub, he asked

Brown, a longtime Houston clinical psychologist who has testified extensively for both the prosecution and the defense in a variety of criminal cases, to examine her. Wright wouldn’t make eye contact with Brown. She sighed and broke into tears. “Her overall presentation had a distinctly dreamy, drifting, unfocused quality that clearly suggested that she was ‘somewhere else,’” Brown later said. When she did talk, she spoke in a flat voice and seemed to be in what Brown called a “dissociated” state, “as if she was up in the air looking down on herself, talking about things she was doing.”

When Brown began to ask about Jeffrey, she became terrified, telling him that her husband was looking for her and her children. She wept as she talked about the way he had punched and kicked her. She mentioned how she tried to “go away” in her mind on those occasions when he would rape her. Jeffrey “had embedded himself in her psyche in a way that made him bigger than life,” Brown said. “He was very, very powerful and very, very threatening.”

Gently, Brown asked her about the night she killed Jeffrey. According to Brown’s notes, Wright talked about the way Jeffrey had shouted at her and shaken her after she told him he needed help and how he’d forced

her to have sex. Then Wright told him Jeffrey went to sleep. It was only after he was asleep, she said, that she went to the kitchen, grabbed a knife, and started stabbing him.

Wright told Brown the same story a month later. Brown assumed he would be testifying at her trial, and he planned to tell the jury that Wright, essentially, had snapped. “I think she had been able to tolerate the abuse as long as Jeffrey directed it on her,” Brown told me. “But when the abuse started spilling over to Bradley, she lost it. On the night she stabbed her husband, she had some kind of mental break. And she stayed that way for days, probably weeks. I don’t want to say she became completely psychotic, but she drifted in and out of reality. She didn’t have any real idea what she was doing, or why.”

But the day before jury selection, Davis called Brown and said he had just read his notes. He informed Brown that Wright had never told him or Ward about Jeffrey’s falling asleep. She had told them a story about Jeffrey’s wielding a knife and shouting, “Die, bitch!” Davis told Brown he would not be testifying. He and Ward wanted to go with her second version of events, which obviously gave them a chance to make a better argument that she faced “imminent harm” and killed Jeffrey in self-defense.

Brown replied that he could explain to a jury the discrepancy in Wright’s stories. He said that when he was seeing her, in the weeks immediately after the killing, she was still so traumatized that she was unable to recall everything that had happened. Maybe, he conjectured, her mind could not yet handle the scene of Jeffrey’s trying to stab her. But gradually, as time passed, more details came back to her. What happened to her was not much different from a case of someone who suffered severe sexual abuse as a child but who didn’t have any memories of the abuse until years later. Brown said that Wright’s telling one story about the killing and then telling another “was not unreasonable” from a psychological standpoint.

But Davis said presenting both the stories at trial would be a “deal breaker.” And as long as he didn’t call Brown to the stand, the psychologist’s conversation with Wright would remain privileged and Siegler would never find out about it. “To this day I wouldn’t have called [Brown] at her trial,” Davis said. But in the process, he lost the only qualified expert who had sat down with Wright and who was prepared to tell a jury that she was not a cold-blooded killer.

“Basically, Susan had been left to fend for herself,” Wice said. “She didn’t have a chance in hell of winning at her very own trial.”

**A**T THE HOBBY UNIT, WRIGHT IS KNOWN as a prison Martha Stewart. Using snacks from the vending machines, she can create a version of a cheesecake and a Snickerdoodle pie. She’s

finally getting to take some college classes—she’s making A’s in algebra, history, and psychology—and she is reading Beth Moore Bible studies that Cindy mails to her. In November Wright spent a Saturday morning in the prison’s dayroom, watching television and taking note of commercials that advertised kids’ toys. She sent Cindy a list of the items she had seen, asking if any of them might make good Christmas gifts for her children. Bradley and Kaily are now living with Jeffrey’s brother, and they have no contact whatsoever with their mother, whose parental rights were terminated after her conviction. “I don’t think they know where I am or if I’m even alive,” said Wright. “But I still like the idea of acting like their mother, even if it is never going to happen.” She tried to smile, and then she put her face in her hands and wept.

Now Wright is left to wonder if a new jury will feel sympathy for her after considering the additional testimony and possibly give her a lighter sentence that would allow her to be released on parole. Members of Jeffrey’s family are hoping that the exact opposite will happen, that she will get sentenced to life. “I consider her some type of animal,” Jeffrey’s father, Ron, told *48 Hours*.

Siegler also wants the jury to hit Wright with a tougher sentence. She has a lot invested in what happens: This was, after all, the case that made her famous. (*People* magazine even ran a laudatory story after the trial that was titled “Drama Queen.”) But she has her own deeply personal reasons as well. When Siegler decided to run for district attorney in 2008 (she narrowly lost in a runoff), she mentioned to the *Houston Chronicle* that she had watched her own mother being beaten by her stepfather. When I asked her recently if that experience had anything to do with her adamant belief that Wright was not a battered woman, she replied, “Of course all of that made all of the difference in the world. You don’t live through a childhood of watching your mom be abused and know that feeling of complete helplessness and not be affected.”

But she added, “The evidence of it all—the bruises, the one time we called law enforcement and they did nothing, the little bit we told our friends, the little bit that they witnessed, the visits to the doctor, the arguments both public and private—all in spite of our efforts to keep it secret, were still there. Susan Wright had no evidence of any of that. I looked for it

as hard as I ever looked for evidence of any defendant’s guilt or innocence.”

Siegler insists that the new information that has emerged during Wright’s appeals only confirms her belief that Wright is an impostor. “Anyone who’s followed this case knows that the story she told Dr. Brown about stabbing Jeffrey while he was sleeping is the true story and the ‘Die, bitch!’ story was nothing more than a sick, pathetic lie,” she said, her voice rising.

I asked Siegler if she truly believed that Wright had stabbed her husband 193 times for a measly \$200,000 in life insurance. “Oh, I don’t think anyone will ever figure out Susan Wright’s entire motive or understand the depth of her anger,” she replied. “I do think she was angry that she and Jeff had a very dysfunctional marriage. I also think she was angry with her father, and maybe she was angry about other parts of her own past. Her anger consumed her. But, please, she didn’t do what she did because she was a battered woman. We looked and looked for just one piece of evidence that proved she was being abused—a police report, a hospital record, a statement to CPS [Child Protective Services], something. There was nothing.”

When I told Wright what Siegler had said, she stared at the floor for several seconds. “Do you know that I sit here in this prison every day, asking myself why I didn’t, just once, go talk to a police officer or go to one of those shelters—or why I didn’t stay at my parents’ after Cindy moved me out of the house? Do you know how many times I’ve asked God for just one chance to do it all over again so that none of this would have happened? But I was so scared back then. I just got, well, paralyzed.”

“Be honest with me,” I said. “Why did you tell Dr. Brown that story about killing Jeffrey when he was sleeping?”

“I’ve racked my brain, but I don’t remember telling Dr. Brown anything like that,” Wright said. “I barely remember talking to him at all. I think two or three months passed before everything began coming back—Jeffrey with the knife and little sweet Bradley knocking on the door.”

There was a silence, and Wright glanced across the room at the prison guard, who was pacing back and forth. She gave me an apologetic look. “I think he’s ready for me to leave,” she said. “And I better not upset him.” She stood up and took a step to the door, but then turned to say one more thing. “If my appeal doesn’t work out, and I don’t get to go home, I want you to tell everyone I’ll be okay. At least I’ll be safe.” She smiled at me. “Isn’t it strange that I had to come to prison to feel safe?”