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Winterbottom's love of a life cut short

By Sam Hemingway

Laura Winterbottom's huge, nearly finished quilt was a beauty -- sunshine yellow with a striking multicolored star bordered in black emanating from its center.

"This is so amazing," Alicia Frank of Colchester said, running her hand across the ripples in the fabric. "Look, she did it by hand. It's all hand-stitched."

Lisa Kenerson of Burlington nodded, then grimaced.

"We still don't know who she was making this for," she said.

There was a pause in the conversation among the members of the Outing Club, an informal group of outdoors enthusiasts, who had gathered at a home in Burlington's Old North End on a cool Wednesday night.

Winterbottom had been an original member of the group. Now, her fellow club members were standing in a circle, each one gripping an edge of the quilt. They were thinking of her, what happened to her. The grief, five weeks later, was still so strong.

On the snowy, blustery night of March 8, police say, Winterbottom, 31, was kidnapped after she left a Burlington bar where she had met some of her Outing Club friends and celebrated Frank's birthday. She was later found raped, strangled and beaten to death in her car.

Gerald Montgomery, 33, of Burlington, was eventually charged with her kidnap, rape and murder. Police say Winterbottom did not know her alleged attacker and believe he climbed into the passenger side of her parked car on College Street moments after she had gotten into the vehicle and started the engine.

The brutal and apparently random nature of the crime has reverberated across the city ever since. Winterbottom, a shy, talented, active woman, epitomized the kind of new Burlingtonian who has made this city a mecca for the young, socially conscious and well-educated.

"It makes you realize how small a town this is," Alex Bertoni, her former boss at Champlain College, reflected in an interview. "We're all interconnected, so when something like this happens, it hits us all. If there is such a thing as six degrees of separation among people, in Burlington it's more like two degrees."

Jim Nordberg, an Outing Club member and host of last week's meeting, looked around the room as the quilt was being folded up. The quilt will be on display at a memorial service for Winterbottom on Saturday at the Unitarian Church.

"The sun is shining and it was nice outside today," Nordberg said. "This is when we'd be spending more time with Laura. Spring is not going to be as bright this year as it

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should be."

Early years Laura Winterbottom was born Sept. 12, 1973; she was the second of Ned and Joann Winterbottom's three children. The family lived in Bedford, N.Y., an upscale suburb of New York City best known as the home of domestic diva Martha Stewart.

"Laura was always energetic, very curious," said Joann Winterbottom, speaking for herself and her husband. "We lived in a rural area near the woods and Laura was interested in nature, bugs and leaves."

Laura was an honor roll student at Byram Hill High School. She enjoyed art and jazz dance, but was also a runner and shot-putter on the school's track team. She was shy, her mother said, careful in the way she selected friends and not interested in drawing attention to herself.

The family's favorite story about Laura as a little girl concerns the time the Winterbottoms were vacationing on Chincoteague Island on Virginia's coast. The family was returning from a day at the beach when Laura, then 10, spotted a caterpillar hanging off the window of the car.

"She screamed to Dad to pull the car over," Laura's older sister, Leigh Winterbottom, said.

As the story goes, Laura carried the furry critter over to the side of the road. She put the caterpillar down, only to watch in horror as it began to crawl back on the road.

"Laura was crying and saying, 'No, no, you're going the wrong way. You're going to get killed,'" Leigh Winterbottom said. "So she picked up the caterpillar and walked off into the woods" to find a safer spot to deposit it.

College days Laura Winterbottom followed in her older sister's footsteps and enrolled at St. Lawrence University in Canton, N.Y., in 1991, a decision that did not surprise her mother. The Winterbottoms are a close-knit family, she said, and the two sisters have always been best friends.

Travis Barrett of Waterford, who also attended St. Lawrence and dated Laura for two years, said she was a woman who enjoyed dancing, loved the music of Neil Young and reveled in the quirkiness of the movie "The Rocky Horror Picture Show."

As reserved as she was, he said, Laura could also be incredibly trusting.

"She'd not always wear her glasses when we'd go biking," Barrett said. "So sometimes she'd see someone she thought she knew and would be very friendly to absolute strangers. And who could resist this pretty lady smiling and waving at them?"

After Winterbottom graduated from St. Lawrence in 1995, she lived again in Bedford and eventually decided to pursue a master's degree in graphic arts from the College of New Rochelle nearby.

By late 1996, she had nearly finished work on her master's degree. She'd also met Dan Brindise, who worked at Bicycle World in Mount Kisco, N.Y., and had sold her a mountain bike. His love of snowboarding prompted him to move to Burlington in early 1997. A month later, she decided to move there, too.

Putting down roots Laura Winterbottom's first year in Burlington didn't go well. While working a temporary job at Gardener's Supply Co., she came down with strep throat. It worsened and became rheumatic fever. A friend drove her back down to her parent's house in Bedford.

"It was touch and go and for a while there. It had advanced pretty far," Joann Winterbottom said. "She was very ill. She couldn't walk and she was taking megadoses of penicillin. We were afraid her heart might have been affected, but it wasn't."

Laura was determined to return to Burlington as soon as she was well. Barrett had first introduced her to Vermont when he brought her home to meet his folks while in college. Now she was making a life here with Brindise.

She took a job at Together Networks, the Internet service provider. And, in early 2001, she responded to a classified ad announcing the formation of an outdoor activity club and went to a meeting at St. Michael's College.

"I had volunteered at the meeting to pass around a sign-up sheet so we could send e-mails out to people," said Barry Cogan of Colchester.

Laura had been too shy to sign the sheet, he said. "So I went over to her and asked, 'Who are you?'"

Over the next four years, the club evolved from being a way for friends to enjoy the outdoors to being a social organization, as well, with Sunday evening suppers and periodic happy hours at downtown bars.

"She had the best laugh," said Debbie Gilbert of South Burlington, one of Laura's closest friends. "She could make you laugh even if you didn't know what she was laughing about."

A new start, then tragedy Laura turned 30 in 2003, and in the year that followed, she began to rethink how she was living her life. Her relationship with Brindise had ended. In mid-2004, she moved out of her apartment and joined HomeShare Vermont, a program that allowed her to care for an elderly woman in Burlington's New North End in return for free rent. In October, she quit her job at Champlain College.

"She was ready to step off one track and move to another," Kenerson said. "Part of the reason for the HomeShare was so she could reduce her expenses, not pay rent, and free up her cash flow so she'd have more flexibility in her job search."

She was also hoping to meet someone, get married and have children, and even tried placing personal ads on the Internet in her search for Mr. Right. Gilbert told about a time Laura colored her hair to give it a reddish look, went out for the evening and was crushed when her date didn't notice the difference in her hair.

"She was so upset, she excused herself and went to the bathroom," Gilbert said. "When she came back, she told the guy that she didn't think his hair looked that great, either."

Her search for a new career went better. She began teaching art to children in the Young Rembrants after-school program in January. By early March, she was excitedly filling out job applications for art teacher positions.

"The last conversation I had with her, the day she died, she told me, 'Mom, I think I've finally found my niche,'" Joann Winterbottom said. "She asked me to help her put together a cover letter and resume. I told her, 'Let's discuss this later. Go have a good time with your friends tonight and give me a call when you get back.'"

Aftermath The Winterbottom family and Laura's friends are full of praise for the way the Burlington Police Department handled the investigation into her death, and particularly with how detectives checked in with the family on a daily basis.

"I felt so comforted," Kenerson said of the police. "The detectives were very courteous, very caring, not intimidating."

Gilbert said she was uneasy when it became apparent Laura's killing might have been random, but never feared "the same thing could happen to me." Nordberg said he understood the police's reluctance to divulge any details about the case that might compromise the investigation.

Still, Laura's violent death haunts those who knew her. Gilbert and Kenerson won't drive the section of Pearl Street where their friend died. Cogan said that when members of the Outing Club go for a hike his year, they will be retracing paths once walked with Laura.

"It is very difficult to talk about this," said Leigh Winterbottom, who moved to Burlington two years ago to be closer to her sister. "It's been devastating. I don't think I've begun to grasp the fact she is not here."

Laura was making the star quilt for herself, her sister said.

Joann Winterbottom said the best she can do now is hold on to Laura's spirit. To that end, she's been living temporarily in Burlington the past two weeks.

"There are so many memories of her here," she said. "When I talk to people who knew her, even people I don't know, it makes it seem she's more alive. It's as if Laura's here, too. But as soon as they leave, I start to cry." Contact Sam Hemingway, state news columnist, at 660-1850 or e-mail at shemingway@bfp.burlingtonfreepress.com

[Memorial service](#)

A nondenominational memorial service celebrating the life of Laura Winterbottom is planned for Saturday in Burlington. All those who knew or were touched by her are invited to attend.

WHAT: Laura Winterbottom's memorial service.

WHEN: 7 p.m. Saturday.

WHERE: First Unitarian Universalist Society Church, 152 Pearl St., Burlington.

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