

People & Places



LEFT — Jyl Stuart Obenschain hugs a kitten. "She was very fond of animals," her mother said. Jyl, affected by schizophrenia, was murdered by her sister, Jackie, who also had the mental illness.



LEFT — Jyl, left, and Jackie enjoy a hot day in Florida.

RIGHT — Jyl is pictured on the cover of "Possessed Mentalities," a book her mother wrote about Jyl's murder.



RIGHT — Maxene Kleier, author of "Possessed Mentalities," said she walked through the orange door of her Florida home to find her daughter's body inert on the floor. Jyl was murdered by Kleier's other daughter, Jackie, shortly before Christmas, 1973.



'Possessed Mentalities,' a book on true survival, emotions and change

STORY, PHOTOS AND PAGE DESIGN BY

RALUCA BARZU

In Maxene Kleier's house, every object has its story.

In the antique Bloomfield home, lamps, chairs, paintings and even accessories on the mantelpiece represent a vital part of Kleier's life and family.

"We don't run from our memories," Kleier, 86, said.

And while each of the stories nested around the house are poignant accounts, Kleier chose to write her first book, "Possessed Mentalities," about the most powerful of all her memories — the murder of her daughter, Jyl.

"It was like cutting a string and letting my life fly out," Kleier said about the day her book was published. "I couldn't sit on top of what I learned without sharing it with everyone."

Its five chapters exemplify a simple synopsis of the book. Kleier's childhood accounts build up to her first marriage to Jack Obenschain and the loss of their first child, Jon, a few hours after being born. The couple would go on to have three more children, Jackie, Jyl and Jan.

The book merges into one of its most painful chapters, "Treatments and Despair" — in which Jyl and Jackie are diagnosed with schizophrenia.

Schizophrenia is a general term for a variety of mental disorders with symptoms such as hallucinations, hearing voices, having feelings that one's thoughts or actions are under someone else's control, and many others.

In the last chapter, "Jyl's Murder," Kleier finds her daughter's body lifeless on the floor.

"Jyl's murder was the hardest part to write," she said. As she first discovered the body, Kleier suspected her daughter died in the hands of an outsider.

Not far from the Jyl's body, on the couch, face down, was an old book of Shakespeare plays Jackie had been reading. Its pages were turned to the scene of stabbing in Macbeth.

Kleier would find out later the scene mimicked how Jackie, 26 at the time, under the hands of schizophrenia, had murdered Jyl, 24, by stabbing.

The mother, although in pain, stayed strong.

"I knew what I had to do," Kleier said during the interview, while she rocked back and forth in the chair that had been splattered with Jyl's blood the night of the murder.

Kleier stood by Jackie's side and understood the illness had taken control over her daughter's mind.

"I had to hang in with her."

Its last chapters revealing a real struggle, Kleier's book suddenly becomes a tale of survival, controlling emotions and changing the system.

"I never for one second held Jackie accountable for Jyl's murder," Kleier added. "And I didn't write the book about the murder. I wrote the book to change systems."

Kleier fought to change the judicial system that may imprison or blame a mentally ill defendant. Kleier also believes in proper monitoring of mentally ill people, which will provide "safety to all citizens, including the defendant."

"I am not offering solutions, but things to consider," she said.

Jackie was found "not guilty for reason of insanity," according to Kleier.

"It was like cutting a string and letting my life fly out."

She admitted to stabbing her sister but, for the longest time, didn't think Jyl was actually dead.

Kleier said Jackie, who now lives in a Florida facility for the mentally ill, was one of the first people to read the book.

She apologized. In a letter to her mother, also published at the end of the book, Jackie admits her mental illness and speaks of a "program" which coerced her into killing Jyl.

Kleier, with patience and stoicism, still stands by Jackie's side. The two talk on the phone regularly and Kleier pays visits to the Florida hospital.

"It's about managing trauma all the way through," she said. "People too frequently respond with faultless emotions."

"Don't let a moment destroy you. People cling to moments and make other moments miserable."

Should Kleier have reacted on her first emotions at seeing her daughter's body drenched in blood on the floor, she might have taken the wrong attitude toward her other daughter, Jackie, she said.

"I wanted a book about changing people, living intelligently, not jumping to conclusions with emotional reasoning," Kleier added. "I had to write 'Possessed Mentalities' because of learned lessons from living with mental illness within my own family."

Besides writing her book in the name of change, Kleier spent her life lobbying for and serving human rights and mental illness causes.

She testified in 1982 before the U.S. Senate Subcommittee of Criminal Law on the insanity plea.

"In my testimony requesting consideration for a national standard for judging insanity, I strongly recommended that the sentence should use, 'Guilty, but Insane.' To imply lack of guilt with sentencing language, 'Not Guilty by Reason of Insanity,' credits innocence for the sick person, and it is in fact inaccurate language," Kleier writes in her book.

The author also served as chairwoman of Statewide Human Rights Committee in Florida, chairwoman of Florida Council of Alcohol, Drug Abuse and Mental Health, member of Governor's Commission for People with Disabilities and Governor's Task Force on Community Mental Health.

Kleier was married to Jack for 38 years before his death. After a period of being single, she met her current husband, Kenneth, with whom she shares the Bloomfield home in which they summer. They have been married 25 years.

"Possessed Mentalities" can be purchased at Betty's Artistic Beauty Salon, 116 Main St., Bloomfield, or at Bardstown Booksellers, downtown Bardstown.

A signing for the book is scheduled for 1 - 5 p.m. Sept. 11 at the Kleier residence, 121 Taylorsville Road. The author will serve tea and offer a tour of the home where many of memorabilia related to "Possessed Mentalities" are located.

Among all the memories gathered throughout her life, Kleier preserved one last keepsake from Jyl — a prayer her daughter wrote on the day of the murder.

"It seemed to me at that



monstrous time and still today a magnificent, soothing message from Jyl," Kleier said of the prayer.

In her last day alive, at her mother's desk overlooking the Gulf of Mexico, Jyl wrote:

"Lord, make me an instrument of your peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love. Where there is injury, pardon. Where there is doubt, faith. Where there is despair, joy. O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled: as to console. To be understood, as to understand. To be loved, as to love. It is in giving that we receive. It is in pardoning that we are pardoned. It is in dying that we are born into eternal life."

Raluca Barzu can be reached at 348-9003 Ext.114 or by e-mail at rbarzu@bardstowncable.net.

TOP— Maxene Kleier shares a smile as she sits in front of her laptop, on which she wrote the book, "Possessed Mentalities."

ABOVE — Kleier poses in her Bloomfield summer home. The signing for her book, "Possessed Mentalities," will be Sept. 11 in the house she shares with her husband, Kenneth.

BELOW— Next to a younger image of herself, Kleier, now 86, reminisces.

