

A Mother Who Did Everything Right

Friends and family of Sheila Cheatham and her son Nathan remember them in happier times.

BY ARANYA TOMSETH
THE CONNECTION

Sixteen years ago, Margaret Johnston responded to a newspaper ad for an in-home babysitter with spaces available. Johnston, a McLean resident, had two small children on her hands and needed some help.

"To my delight, instead of the usual unkempt, gum-chewing, tobacco-scented, tired and bored woman in a bad part of town, I was greeted by a lovely, clean, organized and educated lady with a deep and true love of children," said Johnston.

The woman was Sheila Cheatham, and since that day and until Johnston's children were grown, Cheatham worked in various capaci-

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—Cathryn Lee

ties as a sitter for the Johnston family.

"There is no one I have ever known who personified more the loving, caring universal mother figure," said Johnston. "She was always studying nutrition, child care issues ... and constantly looked for ways

In recent years, Sheila Cheatham had pursued her dream of becoming an actress and has a small role in Clint Eastwood's upcoming film "The Flags of Our Fathers."

to better her care of either her own children or the ones she sat for."

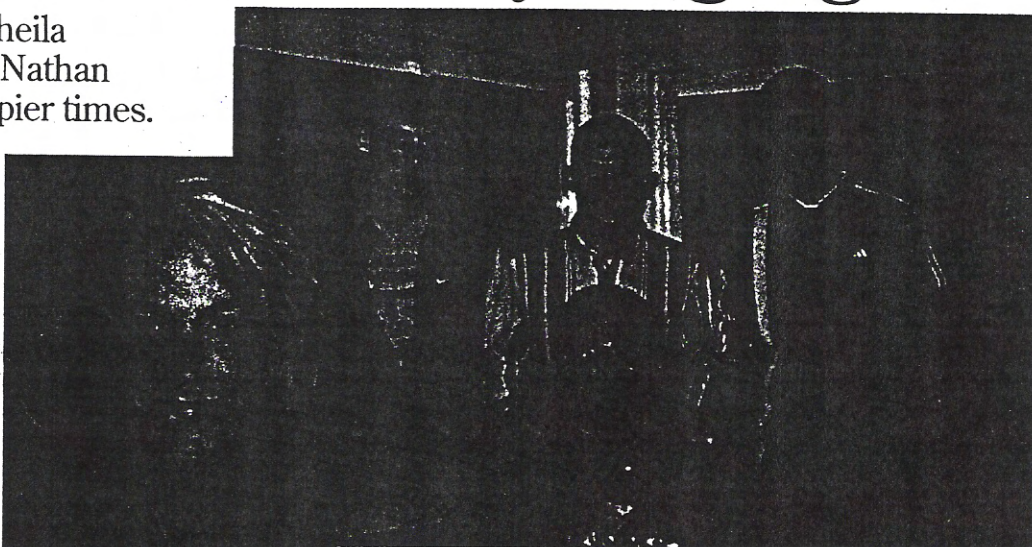
On Christmas morning, Johnston received a phone call and was shocked to learn that not only had Sheila Cheatham been shot and killed, but that she had died at the hands of her 27-year-old son, Nathan.

"Personally I am haunted by the irony that someone like Sheila, whose message to the world was all about nurturing, could have a child who would shoot her," said Johnston.



It was at this home off of Sycamore Springs Lane in Great Falls that Nathan Cheatham killed three other people before taking his own life.

PHOTO BY ARANYA TOMSETH/THE CONNECTION



Chris Cheatham, 19, Dustin Cheatham, 33, Chad Cheatham, 24, and Nathan Cheatham with his dog Sobe on his 26th birthday.

FRIENDS OF SHEILA CHEATHAM are finding it difficult to comprehend how Cheatham's middle son could murder the mother he adored. The 53-year-old, single mother of five boys was known for her steadfast dedication to the well-being of her sons. Cheatham operated her daycare center "Mother Nurture" out of her property on Lewinsville Road in McLean. Subsequently, she developed close relations with many parents throughout Great Falls and McLean.

Cathryn Lee, a resident of Great Falls, enrolled her son in Cheatham's daycare from infancy through preschool.

"She was a beautiful person inside and out," said Lee. "Full of life and energy and enthusiasm ... she talked often about her sons and was always involved in their lives. They often helped her out with her day care business — it was clear that children were Sheila's life and her love, both her own boys and the many she provided daycare for."

Lee also knew Nathan Cheatham, as he lived with his mother or in one of her apartments during the time that Lee's children were enrolled in her daycare. Sheila Cheatham confided to Lee that Nathan had been struggling with depression.

"It was hard to believe that the same person who so brutally killed all those people on Christmas day was the same person I had known," said Lee.

"I recall his boyish face and red hair. He was quiet and soft-spoken, respectful and friendly whenever I saw him. He sometimes helped with the daycare, and the children liked him. It's hard to comprehend what forces could have led him to murder and suicide."

ONE OF THE FEW PEOPLE who does have some insight into the tragic events of Christmas morning is Nathan's older brother Dustin Cheatham, 33, who actually spent Christmas Eve with his mother and Nathan.

"Nate was my best friend and I know what he was going through," said Dustin.

"I would have been able to talk to him or I would have put myself between him and my mother. It will haunt me. It's a tragedy — she was priceless and so was he."

—Dustin Cheatham

Dustin Cheatham says he has fond memories of growing up with Nathan, and that he and his other brothers remember him as "a gentle giant" who was a huge animal lover, and someone who was always willing to help others.

"Nathan, Chad and Chris and myself would wrestle and design tanks and aquariums, and Nate and I would go on hikes together," said Dustin. "Looking back there were so many good times."

Dustin knew that his brother was going through personal difficulties, which is partly what inspired him to

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come and spend the evening with him on Dec. 24. He came armed with funny movies and a Bible which he had personally inscribed to Nathan.

"Everything was fine," said Dustin. "I came over on Christmas Eve and sat on the couch with my mom and Nathan. We opened presents, and we were all sitting around and joking like we always do."

In fact, Dustin Cheatham says he is particularly saddened by the events of Christmas morning because in recent weeks everything had seemed more on track with his brother.

"Less than three weeks ago my mom and I went out to dinner and had a nice two-and-a-half-hour conversation ... Nate had just gotten back from Outward Bound, and I read a letter from a person who had shared his bunk and it said that [Nate] had dreams and aspirations," he said.

More than anything, Dustin Cheatham says that

he wishes he had been there on Christmas morning because he is certain that if someone else had been there, tragedy could have been averted.

"I would have been able to talk to him or I would have put myself between him and my mother," he said. "It will haunt me. It's a tragedy — she was priceless and so was he."

A PRIVATE SERVICE for Nathan Cheatham will be held for family and close friends by invitation only. Funeral services for Sheila Cheatham will be held on Wednesday, Jan. 4 at 11 a.m. at the Arlington Funeral Home at 3901 Fairfax Drive. Anyone whose life was touched by Sheila Cheatham is welcome to come. In lieu of flowers, contributions can be made to the Inova Kellar Center, a nonprofit, outpatient mental health and substance abuse treatment center for youth, located at 10396 Democracy Lane, Fairfax, VA 22030.