



Ed Lowe

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It's not in the Feb. 1, 1998, Newsday story about the apartment building at 214 Linden Ave., Westbury, but Ginger Bonner, now 46, then a resident of Apartment 8, was something of a mess at the time.

Following two years of joblessness ("out on disability," she recalled recently), she had completed her first day of work at what then was called the Regency, now the Amber Court Assisted Living Facility, in Westbury, where she is activity director. Normally, on a Friday night, she would have cooked herself dinner and then walked to one of the nightspots on Post Avenue, but this time, exhausted, she donned her pajamas and went straight to bed.

When the firefighter woke her by banging on her apartment door, her brains pretty much fell out, and she erupted in a form of craziness that she remembers as completely surreal. "It was a nightmare," she said. "I didn't know what was happening. I went running for my two fat cats. I'm crazy with the cats, anyway, but you don't know how you're going to react in an emergency. I had a four-poster bed that I couldn't budge on a dare, and I moved it with one arm to get the one cat out from under it. Whatever you're supposed to do in that kind of crisis, I did the opposite. I'm not good in emergencies. I started screaming for my daddy. I wanted my daddy."

Nat the Cop was Bonner's daddy -- Nat Labensky, of the Bronx, whose heart never left the Bronx, though he had moved his family, first to 77th Road in Flushing, with an eye on moving back to, say Co-op City. However, the family moved farther east instead, to Westbury, following a murder in the Bronx apartment on which he had set his sights.

"He worked in the 79th Precinct," Bonner said. "He had been a decorated sergeant in the Marines. He met my mom on the beat. She was Ruth Most. The Bronx was safer then, and he would take my cousin Larry on the beat with him. Most of the cops were Irish, and my mom thought he was an Irish cop with a kid. One day, it was raining, and he offered my mother a ride. He drove her to the subway, and that's when she found out he was Jewish and single. They were married March 1st, 1953.

"In the precinct, they called him 'Nat the Broom,' because he helped out with cleaning and cooking all the time. He was one of those give you the shirt off his back guys. The kids in our neighborhood in Queens loved him. He used to let them sit on his car. We were one of the first families to have a garage, between the apartment buildings, but we didn't keep a car in it. We kept stuff for kids. He bought me a portable record player, and we played Beatle records in the garage.

"I was very lucky to have him as my daddy. I knew it, too.

"I remember, in my 20s, I saw him visit his mom, my grandma, in a nursing home in Westchester, almost every day, all the way from Westbury. Years later, he was a resident in the same nursing home I worked in. This is after eight heart attacks and three strokes.

"My last job before this one was at the nursing home where my father was a resident, Sun Harbor Manor in Roslyn. I stayed with him for an hour before work and an hour after work and all during my lunch hour. He lingered with dementia, in a wheelchair, for years. I'd wheel him around, and I would keep saying, 'I love you, Daddy,' while he cursed at whatever bothered him. Dementia can make you pretty nasty. I wanted to make sure he knew that I loved him. I was so scared that he would die and not know that I loved him. I would say it all the time. 'I love you, Daddy.'

"We were so alike that it's scary. We had a bond. I look like him. I act like him. I feel him inside me. And whenever there's an emergency, I cry for him.

"Anyway," Bonner said, "his suffering ended Sept. 8, 1996. I was a basket case at the funeral. To this day, I still get choked up thinking about it. But I always felt my dad was with me. I can feel him with me, especially during bad times. In an automobile accident, I cried his name. In intensive care, I cried his name. My mother gave me mementos, like his

badge, his nightstick.

"So, in 1998, my apartment building goes on fire. I think it was electrical in origin. I lost everything, although not to fire, mostly to smoke and water damage. But, I'm in the firehouse. The apartment building was across Linden Avenue from the fire department, and that night they took everybody from the building across the street to the second floor of the fire department building, and we were sprawled all over the place.

"My mom was there. I was a mess, crying for my father. There was a person there that I actually thought for a moment was my dad. You don't know what you're going to be like in an emergency. All of a sudden, a man comes up to me in a uniform. I don't know if he was a fireman or a policeman. I think policeman. I'm crying. He walks right up to me. There was no way in the world he could have known that I was from Apartment 8. He hands me something and says, 'This is yours.' And he walks away.

"I look in my hand, and it's my father's badge."

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