Kara Robinson Chamberlain, 15, was watering plants and bushes in the front yard of a friend's house in West Columbia, S.C, in the early afternoon of June 24, 2002, when a Trans Am pulled in the driveway and an affable guy in his late 30s, wearing jeans, a button-down shirt and a baseball cap, got out to offer some "pamphlets."
"He said, 'Are your parent's home?' and I said, 'Well, this isn't my house. This is my friend's house,'" Kara, now 35, tells PEOPLE. "And he said, 'Okay, well what about her parents, are her parent's home?' And I said, 'No, her mom's not home right now.'"

For more on Kara Robinson Chamberlain, listen below to our daily podcast on PEOPLE Every Day.

"I'll just leave these with you," he told her as he approached.

Suddenly, the man, who was later identified as serial killer Richard Evonitz, pulled out a gun, pressed it to her neck and forced her into a large storage bin that was stowed on the back seat of the car.

As he drove towards his apartment, Kara began counting the turns he made, in hopes of later finding her way home again.

She noticed details: He was listening to a classic rock station and smoking Marlboro red cigarettes. She even memorized the serial number on the inside of the plastic container that he had forced her to kneel inside.

"My survival mechanism said, 'All right, let's gather as much information as we can,'" she says. "Fear barely even kicked in ... the human will to survive and the survival mechanism really just can't be underestimated."

On his way to his apartment, he pulled over and restrained her with handcuffs and put a gag in her mouth. He then took her to his cluttered apartment — also home to a guinea pig, a lizard and other small animals — and assaulted her for 18 hours.
Despite being terrorized, she tried to find ways to identify him — the names of his doctor and dentist were on his fridge — and to keep him calm. When he wanted her
to have some food, "I said, 'Well, I'm not going to eat right now, but is there anything I can do for you?'' she says. "I actually ended up sweeping his kitchen."

That kind of manipulation, says Sheriff Leon Lott of Richland County, S.C., may have helped save her life. "She was just putting him at ease and making him feel comfortable, gaining his trust. And that's what police negotiators do," explains Lott in this week's issue of PEOPLE. "She controlled her emotions to the point where she was able to develop a plan."

In the dawn hours, while Evonitz was asleep, Kara was able to free one hand from a pair of handcuffs and unclip a leg restraint. She quietly tiptoed to the front door and made her escape.

She ran towards a car in the parking lot and asked the two people inside to take her to the police station, where she recounted her ordeal. She was asked by the officers to take them back to Evonitz's apartment, and because of her keen powers of observation and the help of the apartment maintenance man, they found his lair.

However, by the time authorities got there, Evonitz had fled.

Inside his apartment they found a locked foot-locker with newspaper clippings about the unsolved murders of three girls: Sofia Silva and sisters Kati and Kristin Lisk. They had all gone missing in Spotsylvania County, Va., more than five years before Kara's abduction.

Police tracked Evonitz to Sarasota, Fla., and a high speed chase there ended when he ran over spike strips on the highway and was attacked by a police dog. Evonitz then shot himself.
For her help in solving the murders of Sofia and the Lisk sisters, Kara received $150,000 in reward money and was able to meet their families.

"It was one of the most important things that's ever happened to me," she says. "Because it brought home the importance of what I did. Because I felt like, 'Wow, I'm actually giving these families something that they never would've gotten without me.' Just the closure of knowing that the person responsible for their daughters' death is no longer here."

Encouraged by Sheriff Lott, Kara took a part-time job in the summer during high school and college doing administrative work with the sheriff's department. She later became a school resource officer and an investigator on child abuse and sexual assault cases.

She left her job in law enforcement after her two boys, whom she had with husband Joe Chamberlain, were born.
In 2019, after participating in an interview with kidnapping survivor Elizabeth Smart, she took part in a 90-minute Lifetime special, *Smart Justice: The Jayme Closs Case*, with five other survivors to lend support to Closs, a Wisconsin teen who escaped her captor in 2019.

"I sat down on a couch with Elizabeth and five other women who had survived kidnappings and sexual assaults. And that was the moment that I realized that I really had a bigger purpose. I knew that I could find a reason for what happened. And I always knew that what happened to me was something that happened so that I could help other people," she says.

"I was healed on that couch, sitting there talking to those women, in a way that I didn't even realize I was hurting," Kara says. "Just to sit down and talk to women who really understood the heart of what I had been through."

She continues: "If you look at what our statistics say, which is probably a conservative estimate, that one in three women experience sexual assault in their lifetime. I realized that up to maybe more than a third of our population of women are experiencing something. And they may never get the opportunity to sit down and to talk to someone who really understands what they went through. And I thought, if I can do that, if I can bring that to other women in some way, shape or form, that would just be the epitome of my purpose, if I could just help other people."
Kara began working with Smart to make the documentary, *Escaping Captivity: The Kara Robinson Story*, for Oxygen, released last year.

"I knew that if I wanted to help people, I needed to tell my story on a way that I was proud of," she says.

Kara set up a website, where she shares her story and spreads "hope and encouragement to other survivors."

She also uses social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram to help spread the word and "provides advice on how to heal, how to support, how to speak to victims of crime, and how to embrace a survivor mentality."

"One of the things is helping women to see themselves in others, because I think that it can be so empowering when we just speak to someone who understands what we've been through," Kara says. "I would love to help them tell their stories in a way that really lets them take ownership of the story and really empowers them to take back the power."

*For more on Kara Robinson Chamberlain, subscribe now to PEOPLE, or pick up this week's issue, on newsstands now.*

Kara says she is also passionate about helping people find tools for healing. "I think that therapy for so many is such a great resource, but I think that, one, it's not accessible to every person. I think that it's also not a good fit for every person and there are so many great healing tools that we can utilize on our own."

For Kara, it's exercise.

"Exercise is a huge thing for me, as far as my mental and physical wellness. It keeps me very centered and grounded, but there's also a lot of other tools, whether it be meditation or breathwork or tapping emotional freedom therapy. There's just so many tools that we can use to release those more subconscious ideas that we have about ourselves and our trauma or our body, how our body remembers that trauma."

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intriguing unsolved cases.

She is also working with a consultant to try and overhaul victim representation in the media.

"In the same way there would be an intimacy coordinator on a set. Someone that is checking in with everyone and making sure, if there's a scene where there's intimacy, they're checking in with the actors and they're making sure they're comfortable at every point of the game," she says. "There should be someone who's doing that when someone is working with victims. There is no media standard for how victim's stories are told, how they're represented, how they're treated."

She also hopes one day to investigate other possible unknown victims connected to Evonitz. "It is my gut belief that he was responsible for more than the three murders we know about."

She is also in the process of writing a book.

*If you or someone you know has been sexually assaulted, please contact the National Sexual Assault Hotline at 1-800-656-HOPE (4673) or go to rainn.org.*

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