



Teena, Brandon (1972-1993)

by Andrew Matzner

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Brandon Teena.
A still from the promotional trailer for the film *The Brandon Teena Story*.

Twenty-year-old Brandon Teena was brutally murdered on December 31, 1993 on account of gender non-conformity. The incident attracted national attention and spurred transgender activists to demonstrate against the ever-increasing regularity of violence towards transgendered people.

Teena's life and death eventually became the subject of two critically acclaimed films: the 1998 documentary *The Brandon Teena Story* (directed by Susan Muska and Greta Olafsdottir) and the 1999 feature *Boys Don't Cry* (directed by Kimberly Peirce), for which Hilary Swank, as Brandon, won an Academy Award as Best Actress.

Brandon Teena, a biological female, was born Teena Renae Brandon on December 12, 1972 in Lincoln, Nebraska. During childhood, Teena was a tomboy, and as an adolescent he wrestled with both gender identity and sexual orientation issues. In his late teens, Teena began passing as a male and changed his name to Brandon Teena.

By 1993 Teena had been involved in a string of relationships with women who were unaware of his birth sex. He loved to lavish expensive gifts on his girlfriends, and resorted to stealing and check forgery to do so. Having been arrested multiple times, Teena decided to leave Lincoln in November 1993. He moved to Falls City, a rural community in southern Nebraska.

Soon after arriving in Falls City, Teena, still living as a man, began dating Lana Tisdel. Following habit, he once again financed his generosity by forging checks. In the middle of December, local police arrested Teena, booked him on the misdemeanor charge of check forgery, and jailed him. During processing the police discovered that Teena was biologically female and provided this information to the local newspaper, the *Falls City Journal*, which printed it.

Teena's forced outing caused a stir in the small town. His girlfriend, Lana, however, did not react negatively to the news, and in fact bailed him out of jail. Nevertheless, some of Lana's male friends who had become close to Teena were shocked and angered by the disclosure.

Two of those friends, 22-year-old John Lotter (an ex-boyfriend of Lana's) and 21-year-old Tom Nissen, violently confronted Teena at a Christmas Eve party and pulled down his pants in order to humiliate him in front of Lana. Later that night, after getting him alone, Lotter and Nissen raped and severely beat Teena. They also threatened to kill him if he reported what they had done to him.

After escaping from the two men, Teena nevertheless immediately made his way to the police and reported the attack. Lotter and Nissen were brought in for questioning, but subsequently released, with no arrests having been made.

One week later, on New Year's Eve, Lotter and Nissen decided to track Teena down. They discovered him at the remote farmhouse of Lisa Lambert, with whom he had been staying. Lotter and Nissen murdered Teena

by shooting and stabbing him; they also killed Lambert and another houseguest, Phillip DeVine.

Authorities soon learned of the murders, and Lotter and Nissen were arrested. During the pair's trials, Nissen agreed to testify against Lotter in return for a reduced sentence. Accordingly, after both were convicted, Nissen was sentenced to life in prison without parole, while Lotter received the death penalty. (Lotter is currently on death row.)

After the trials, Teena's mother, JoAnn Brandon, filed a civil suit against Richardson County and its sheriff, Charles Laux, for half a million dollars. She claimed that by not immediately arresting Lotter and Nissen, the sheriff failed to protect her child, and therefore played a role in enabling Teena's murder to occur. In April 2001 the Nebraska Supreme Court ruled that Sheriff Laux had in fact been negligent, and awarded Mrs. Brandon \$98,223 in damages.

Publicity focused on the brutal death of Brandon Teena, and the negligence of law enforcement authorities, has served to highlight the problem of violence against glbtq people, especially those who violate gender expectations. Such publicity has helped energize the movement to include gender identity and sexual orientation in hate crimes legislation.

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