

A good character witness for Rolf Harris changes her opinion

UPDATED WED JUL 02 11:28:00 EST 2014

Sarah Ferguson interviews Cathy Henkel, a defence witness and long term friend of Rolf Harris, on the guilty verdict handed down against Harris in London.

TRANSCRIPT

SARAH FERGUSON: Cathy Henkel has been a friend of Harris' since he discovered her waitressing in a South African hotel 40 years ago and encouraged her to move to Australia. She was called to give evidence for the prosecution in London.

She joined me a short time ago from Brisbane.

Cathy Henkel, welcome to 7:30.

CATHY HENKEL, FILM PRODUCER: Thank you.

SARAH FERGUSON: Just start, Cathy, by telling me what went through your head when you learned that Rolf Harris had been found guilty?

CATHY HENKEL: Well, I wasn't surprised. I was... I think it's the right decision but I'm also very sad. I think it's just a very, very sad day.

SARAH FERGUSON: What is it that makes you sad?

CATHY HENKEL: Well, I've known him for a long time and I still remember what a wonderful man he was and all the good things he did. But I also - it's very conflicting because I also believe that he's done this thing and I do believe the girls and very much believe what... that the verdict is a right one and he must be punished. So it's, it's very confusing.

SARAH FERGUSON: You were a witness in the trial. What was that experience like?

CATHY HENKEL: It was a really unpleasant experience, I suppose. But I was pleased to be able to testify on behalf of Tonya Lee, the Australian girl who was in my care at the time. And I was there to tell the story of the facts of what happened that night.

SARAH FERGUSON: But tell me about that experience: being part of the case that was made against him?

CATHY HENKEL (sighs): Well, it was very difficult walking in and seeing him in the booth, knowing that he was there. I made short eye contact and that was it. Just looked straight at the jury. It's a very foreboding experience being in a courtroom with the judge and everyone in their robes and the packed courtroom. There was media everywhere. I just told the story that I had to tell.

SARAH FERGUSON: And just before we get to the story of your experience with him: was there actually a moment when you accepted that the charges against him were true?

CATHY HENKEL: Yes, it did take me some time but there was a moment. When Tonya told me what had happened to her, I did believe her. And also another person that I know told me he'd done the same thing to them and at that point, yes, all hope that it had somehow been a big mistake faded.

SARAH FERGUSON: So tell me about your understanding of what happened with Tonya Lee because in the first place you were not convinced about that story?

CATHY HENKEL: Well, I invited him to see the show we were touring England with, this theatre troupe, and I invited him to come and see the show.

Afterwards we went to a pub, as you do in England, and he gave them feedback and there was a wonderful evening, a great feeling in the place. He was being very supportive of them. My memory of the night was that it was a very good night and he'd done them a favour.

It did not occur to me for one second that he'd done anything inappropriate to Tonya. And she was 13 at the time and she was just not able to tell me, which I now understand. She was intimidated. She was terrified her mother would find out. She didn't think anyone would believe her.

I think the story is that when someone is that famous and that well-known and she knew was a friend of mine, it's very, very hard for a child to talk about that and to confess and I really understand that now.

SARAH FERGUSON: How did you come to believe Tonya Lee's story?

CATHY HENKEL: I think, when I heard her tell the story and when I met her in London and spoke with her, it was very evident to me that she was telling the truth.

SARAH FERGUSON: Looking back, do you now have any kind of a memory of anything that happened between them?

CATHY HENKEL: You know, it's funny about memory. There was a moment where I do remember her sitting on his lap but it didn't occur to me even then that there was anything inappropriate or worrying about that. I just thought it was part of a sort of a very friendly night. But yeah, I do have a flash memory of that happening.

SARAH FERGUSON: And what do you think about that now when you recall it?

CATHY HENKEL: Well, I think it's awful. I'm really appalled by the whole idea of it. And I think that this is what I think this trial is about, that that kind of behaviour is absolutely not acceptable and people who do that must be brought to account and be punished for it.

And I think it's really important also to understand why children and young people - there's many cases of this happening in the churches and so on - why they don't speak out. And I think this case is very much in support of the women who have had the courage to speak out and tell about it.

SARAH FERGUSON: Now, it must have been a very strange experience for you having Rolf Harris' brother call you. Has he tried to get you to downplay your testimony? Is that right?

CATHY HENKEL: As I understand it, Bruce had only just heard about it himself and so I think he called me thinking, "Who else can I speak to?" He did badger me a little bit in the sense of asking me repeatedly, "It couldn't have happened. You must be able to say it couldn't have happened." But I couldn't say that because, I mean, the circumstances were there. I didn't see it happen but I couldn't say it didn't happen. And so I did feel pressured about that and eventually I had to say, "Look, I'm sorry, I can't say it didn't happen."

SARAH FERGUSON: Let's just go back to your relationship with Rolf Harris in the first place. What kind of a person was he then?

CATHY HENKEL: Well, I met him when I was 19. I was waitressing in a hotel in South Africa. And he was very charming and funny and warm. And he has a sort of very cuddly, flirty personality but I never felt it was inappropriate.

SARAH FERGUSON: You say that he was flirty but you never observed anything sinister in the way he behaved?

CATHY HENKEL: Not at all. I mean, if I had I would certainly not have allowed him anywhere near these young children or my own daughter, for that matter. So I never thought he would do anything inappropriate, no.

SARAH FERGUSON: And that wasn't just to do with the mores of the time; that people turned a blind eye to the behaviour particularly of entertainment figures?

CATHY HENKEL: Well, it was a different time and there was a different attitude but I never thought he would do anything like that to children, absolutely did not occur to me for a second.

SARAH FERGUSON: You pulled up those photos of him recently. When you look at those photos of the Rolf Harris that you knew then, what goes through your mind?

CATHY HENKEL: Oh, it's just so sad, you know. He was so supportive of me and so kind. I saw such a lovely, lovely person and, I mean, I was very lucky. He was very kind to me and just a great friend. I really feel incredibly sad that this has happened and knowing that he will go to jail, although I think the verdict is correct it doesn't give me any joy whatsoever.

SARAH FERGUSON: You emailed him before, I think, before you took part in the case. Would you have contact with him again, do you think?

CATHY HENKEL: I don't know. I doubt he will have contact with me as I, you know, have been part of the testimony against him. I would hope so, perhaps in some future time. That might happen but I doubt it.

SARAH FERGUSON: Cathy Henkel, thank you very much indeed for sharing those recollections with us.

CATHY HENKEL: Thank you.

7.30POSTED TUE JUL 01 20:11:00 EST 2014