

# She'd been tortured, raped and abducted. Then a legal twist launched a new nightmare

Gloria had made a lucky escape. But because her kidnapper had taken her across a state border, she faced two legal systems – and a long battle for justice.

By Karen Percy and Greg Callaghan  
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Gloria Anderson wants an end to the system in which the crimes against her had to be tried in two states. "I don't want anyone to go through what I have," she says. *CREDIT: PETER TARASIUK*

**Gloria Anderson** had been trapped in the wooden wardrobe for hours. Sensing that her captor was no longer around, she used every ounce of her strength to kick against its

doors. Twenty minutes later, one of them finally gave way, releasing her from her cramped, stuffy prison. Her wrists were bound tightly behind her back but she'd managed to loosen the tape from her mouth by clenching and unclenching her lips and jaw. She stood up on her bare feet, took a deep breath and stared out into a dimly lit room.

The 6pm news was blaring from the TV, its volume cranked up to muffle any cries for help. Gloria estimated it had been more than four hours since her captor had abandoned her here, at the Colonial Motel in the NSW town of Young, just over 150 kilometres from Canberra. Earlier, in the morning light of this winter's day in July 2011, he'd rushed Anderson from her car into this room, where he'd forced her to perform sexual acts on him. Only then did he allow her to remove the sewing needles he'd inserted into her nipples the day before, when he'd kidnapped her from her home in Melbourne's Dandenong and driven them 730 kilometres across state lines. After taping her mouth and wrists, and bundling her into the wardrobe, which he secured with his rugby tie, he'd suddenly left, purportedly to meet a friend.

Having finally freed herself, the 30-year-old mother of two was now in a race against the clock. She eyeballed the front door – “if he walks in now, I'm dead” – before fumbling with her bound hands to unlock it. She ran across the car park to the motel reception.

A bell chimed as she entered, but no one was at the front desk. Whimpering “Help, help,” Anderson made herself small in the corner. The relief manager emerged, taking a second to digest the astonishing scene. “I'm from room 1,” Anderson stammered. “I've been abducted from Melbourne ... I work at a soup kitchen and drop-in centre.” The manager called out to her husband, who also worked there; he immediately locked the door and called the police.

When the two officers arrived, they took photos of Anderson before cutting her free. These images of a shocked, shattered woman would subsequently be used as proof of her attacker's guilt.

Anderson was driven to Young Hospital for immediate medical attention, and then to Canberra Hospital for a full forensic examination, before being returned to a crisis centre in Young for short-term support. A team of detectives from NSW's specialist sex crimes unit was dispatched from Sydney, and she provided a detailed statement.

She described how the nightmare had begun in a quiet suburban home in Melbourne's south-east the previous Saturday, when things had taken a very dark turn with her boarder. While she'd had some misgivings about Darin Lyndon Wheeldon, she explained to detectives, she'd never imagined him capable of this.

But a far longer ordeal was about to start, long after Wheeldon was charged with kidnapping and multiple counts of sexual assault, after he was fingerprinted and remanded in custody in Sydney. At one point during a seven-and-a-half-year merry-go-round through the NSW and Victorian courts, an exasperated Anderson would contact the then shadow federal attorney-general, Mark Dreyfus. By so doing, Anderson would expose a flaw in the Australian legal system for cross-state crimes.



Darin Wheeldon had volunteered at the same drop-in centre as Anderson. She took him in as a boarder, offering him safe shelter.

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**Gloria Anderson's** two-storey brick-veneer townhouse in Melbourne's south-east is spotless. A scattering of seeds beneath an empty birdcage is the only sign of untidiness, its two residents – yellow and grey cockatiels – sitting atop the cage, quietly picking away at grass stems. This serene scene is a world away from the ramshackle 1950s weatherboard cottage where Anderson lived more than a decade earlier, the home she shared with her two children and the boarder out the back, Darin Wheeldon, a man she now describes as “pure evil”.

It's a summer's afternoon in December, and Anderson looks more relaxed and less wary than she did during our first meeting nine months earlier. She speaks calmly but clearly, her voice revealing a person who has recounted her story over and over again. The pain of those three days in July 2011 is still evident. But she wants people to know she's a survivor.

Until the #LetHerSpeak and #LetUsSpeak campaigns, which began in 2018, the law in Tasmania, the Northern Territory and Victoria prevented victims of sexual crimes from being publicly identified, even by themselves, without expensive court orders. Survivor Grace Tame and others lobbied against this system after Tame's abuser boasted about his offences on social media, and the laws were amended.

Anderson has granted *Good Weekend* permission to tell her story, using her name, to highlight the way competing state laws can extend the pain of survivors of violence and sexual assault. In her case, because Wheeldon committed his crimes in two states, he

was subject to two police investigations and three trials across two legal systems. A NSW jury could only consider the crimes in NSW; a Victorian jury the crimes in their own state. Anderson is campaigning for an end to multiple trials for the one offence in sexual assault and kidnapping cases, regardless of where the crime took place. "I don't want anyone to go through what I have," she says simply.

A committed Christian since she was a child, Anderson, now 41, told Wheeldon more than once during and after her ordeal that she forgave him. "Forgiveness and helping others are very important to me," she explains. "Giving people a second chance is all part of this. I think this is why I tolerated Darin's behaviour towards me for so long."

That spirit of forgiveness was something she observed growing up the youngest of seven in a Christian family in a large town in northern India, her parents inviting the less fortunate and those recovering from operations to join the family dinner table. Her father, an orthopaedic surgeon, and mother, a health administrator, ran their own 20-bed private hospital. "Our hospital used to be at the front, our house at the back," she recalls.

Inspired by the charitable work of her parents and the famed Catholic nun Mother Teresa, Anderson moved to Pune in western India to begin community studies when she was 18. It was here, in 1999, that she began a relationship with a 23-year-old student from Melbourne who would become her husband.

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Drawn together by their shared faith, a passion for music and a desire to do good work, the couple married in India the following year. In 2002 they moved to Melbourne, the same year their first child, a son, was born. A daughter came along in 2005, the year after Anderson became a permanent Australian resident (citizenship was granted in 2019).

The family of four lived in Dandenong, where in 2006 Anderson began volunteering at a soup kitchen and drop-in centre. In mid-2010, Anderson and her husband separated, agreeing to share custody of their two children, then eight and five.

It was around this time, while ladling out curries and stews at the drop-in centre, that Anderson met Darin Wheeldon. The 35-year-old welder, forklift driver and former security guard from Sydney initially came to the centre for assistance, but wound up working there as a volunteer. A burly man with a shaved head, a coal-black horseshoe moustache and a taste for body art – including a tattoo of Ned Kelly in armour on his right shoulder – Wheeldon was desperate to get out of the Clayton boarding house he'd been staying in, where violence, including stabbings, was common.

After the split with her husband, Anderson had taken in boarders to supplement her income and to help them get back on their feet. Wheeldon crashed on the couch for some months, but in October 2010 he took over the granny flat out the back, paying \$180 a week for the room, internet and food. He appeared kind and attentive, sometimes mowing the grass and taking the kids to school.

It soon became apparent that he was attracted to Anderson, presenting her with flowers and chocolates, buying her drinks at drop-in centre social events. Anderson had never been much of a drinker but, she says, “Darin kept saying I needed to lighten up and have a drink.” She got drunk with him twice.

Over those months, Wheeldon displayed many of the tell-tale signs of what Anderson now recognises as coercive control; deterring other boarders from moving in, getting her to drink more, being possessive about her movements. He accompanied her when she served divorce papers on her ex-husband, with whom she was generally on good terms. “Darin seemed like he was trying to be a saviour in my situation,” she told police.

Anderson had no sexual interest in Wheeldon and says she made that clear, but he persisted, buying her lingerie and continuing to make advances. On occasion she relented and for several months they had intermittent sexual encounters. “There was always a sense of pressure from Darin to have a sexual relationship with him,” she told police. “I just went along with it.”

Until she didn't.



Gloria Anderson in happier times at the drop-in centre where she volunteered. Helping others remains “very important” to her.

**Anderson celebrated** her 30th birthday in May 2011 with a 1980s-themed party, inviting 20 or so friends to her home. Wheeldon dressed as tough-guy actor Mr. T; Anderson's costume was inspired by the 1983 movie *Flashdance*. After everyone had left, Wheeldon followed Anderson into her room and sexually assaulted her. She demanded he stop – and he did.

Anderson was adamant: *no more*. She reiterated that she didn't want him as a boyfriend; they had nothing in common. For the next couple of months, Wheeldon respected her boundaries. "Although I was sick of his persistent sexual behaviour, I felt I was unable to kick Darin out of the house because I would struggle to pay the rent and I felt bad that he had nowhere to go," she explains. To avoid Wheeldon when her children were at their father's house, she occasionally stayed at a friend's place.

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**Saturday July 2, 2011** began much like any other weekend. After her ex-husband picked up the children, Anderson set off for the drop-in centre where she was catering for the wedding of one of the centre's clients. Wheeldon, meanwhile, dressed in a shirt and his favourite rugby tie to go to his casual job coaching the Monash University rugby union team; he'd been a keen player since his teens. They later met up at a local pub for the birthday of a drop-in centre colleague.

When they arrived home, Wheeldon tried to initiate sex. "For the hundredth time, I've told you I don't want this," Anderson complained in exasperation. Wheeldon slapped her face and accused her of being a tease. After pulling her from the living room into the bedroom, he punched and stripped her, tied her to the bed and left the room. He returned with shaving cream and a razor, then proceeded to shave her pubic hair and photograph his work. Further humiliations followed; he squirted vodka into her mouth and forced her to give him oral sex. She cried and asked him to stop.

Wheeldon later appeared remorseful. "What have I done?" he asked, weeping. "I spoil everything, I wreck everything." Before returning to his granny flat, he asked Anderson if she'd be going to the police. She told him he should turn himself in. "I trusted him that he would go," Anderson would tell a NSW jury in 2013. "He was apologetic and [I] had sort of forgiven him for what he had done and I was scared and I asked him to leave."

Shortly after waking at 7am on the Sunday, Anderson sent a text message to a friend, a church counsellor, alerting her to what happened. *He cried after wat he did ... asked me wat to do? I said hand yourself in?*

*how r u?* the counsellor texted back.

*scared*, Anderson replied.

Later calls from the counsellor went unanswered.

Despite his tearful apology the night before, Wheeldon appeared to have had a major change of heart. As they drank coffee in the backyard, he asked Anderson whether she still expected him to go to the police. When she replied yes, "because I'm scared", his attitude changed. As she was getting ready for church, he followed her into her room, pushed her onto her bed, bound her hands with his rugby tie, covered her head with a pillowcase and forced her towards his flat out the back.

There he tied her feet together with her dressing gown belt. He then assaulted her with what she thinks was a wire hanger, striking her bare buttocks at least 10 times. After taking her back to her bedroom, he inserted a sewing needle into each of her nipples,



twisting them to cause her pain. “Consequences, consequences, consequences, everything you do now will have consequences,” he said.

At one point, Anderson heard him tapping on a keyboard. Wheeldon told her he was sending photos of Anderson, her children and her home to a mate who’d just been released from prison – photos she thinks he downloaded from her Facebook account. “It’s interesting to see what he can do with a pair of pliers. He doesn’t have any mercy for children,” Wheeldon threatened.

“Did you get the pictures and stuff?” she heard him say into the phone. To this day, she doesn’t know whether he was bluffing.

To buy time, Wheeldon made Anderson call her ex-husband to say she was sick and wouldn’t be at church that morning to pick up the children. They arranged for the children to return the following morning instead. Grabbing Anderson’s phone, Wheeldon then made her reply to her counsellor’s earlier texts: *all is ok, been to the hospital, Darin will hand himself in tomorrow.*

Over the next few hours, Wheeldon tortured and raped her, including squirting a stinging liquid – later found to be methylated spirits – into her vagina. He demanded her bank details, then transferred \$1600 into his own account. Sometime after midday, Anderson heard Wheeldon on the telephone again, making arrangements to meet someone. Not long after, he packed a bag for himself, grabbed some clothes for Anderson, and ordered her, unbound and shoeless on a cold winter’s morning, to get into her car.

“We’re going for a little ride,” he said.

*He taunted her about her faith. “Look, where’s your God now? There’s no God. Where are your pastor friends? There’s nobody.”*

**Not long after leaving the house,** Wheeldon dumped Anderson’s phone. At rest stops and quiet stretches of road, he forced her to give him oral sex. Whenever they approached a population centre or service station, he made her hide in the boot. “I don’t want you to create a scene,” he warned.

CCTV images would later confirm this, showing Wheeldon in his grey hoodie refuelling, picking up snacks or agitatedly checking ATMs to see if the cash had landed in his account. There was no sign of Anderson. She told police that he raped her again in a rented cabin in the tourist town of Alexandra, 130 kilometres north-east of Melbourne, after he’d bought duct tape to tie her arms and legs and cover her mouth.

When they first drove out of Melbourne, he proposed dropping her at the Victoria-NSW border. Despite her pleas to be let go, the border came and went. “Oh, by the way, welcome to NSW, a shithole of a place,” he hissed. While there were opportunities to flee, Anderson was paralysed by fear and frightened of what he might do to her children. He taunted her about her faith. “Look, where’s your God now? There’s no God. Where are your pastor friends? There’s nobody.”

**After abandoning** Anderson at the motel in Young, Wheeldon drove her car north-east, eventually reaching the Great Western Highway. At Mt Lambie, about 200 kilometres from Young, he smashed into the guardrail. Witnesses told police the car initially failed to brake, suggesting he may have been asleep at the wheel.

Wheeldon was airlifted to Sydney's Westmead Hospital with serious injuries. It didn't take long for NSW Police to realise the car he'd been driving belonged to the terrified woman they'd found in Young. Back in Melbourne Anderson's former husband had reported her missing, after turning up with the kids on Monday morning to find an empty house. None of her friends knew her whereabouts.

Wheeldon would later tell police the sexual assaults were consensual "experimentation" in "bondage and stuff". He'd intended to drive to Orange to pick up drugs from a biker gang, he said, and always planned to return to Young.

A later report by a psychiatrist suggested Wheeldon had borderline personality disorder. He had a history of violence, having served short sentences for assault in NSW and Queensland, and been charged with breach of bail in South Australia.

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**The first trial** opened in Sydney's Downing Centre, a sprawling wedding cake of a building that was once a department store, in July 2013. But, within a few days, the jury was dismissed after Wheeldon's defence team introduced evidence about a previous rape complaint made by Anderson.

Because her testimony had been recorded during this first mistrial, it could be played to the jury in the next trial, which started just a few days later, saving some distress. But Anderson still had to take the stand for cross-examination, which she found particularly difficult. "While she [Wheeldon's lawyer] was questioning me, there was a bit of a 'huh' or fake laugh sort of thing between sentences. That attitude sort of undermined what I was saying; that really did feel horrible." Away from her children, she felt utterly alone. "Going into the NSW trial knowing I'd have to do it all over again in Victoria was bad enough," she recalls. "I ended up getting vertigo for the first time ever in NSW, I think due to stress."

According to Wheeldon's version of events, Anderson was a willing participant in a plan to buy drugs to blackmail her ex-husband, and that she'd asked him to shave and photograph her pubic area. Her nipples were already pierced, he said, and – implausibly – she'd tied her own hands and legs. "Apparently everything was consensual," Anderson laughs bitterly. "It was all part of a plan ... he had made up ... and I went along with it, apparently."

*"Even when that [trial] finished, it didn't really feel like it. It was like, 'there's another one to come,' so I could not close the chapter."*

The jury took just 90 minutes to find Wheeldon guilty of four counts of aggravated sexual assault without consent, one of indecent assault and one of detaining Anderson for advantage. He was sentenced to 11 years' jail, with parole set at seven years. "Even



when that [trial] finished, it didn't really feel like it," recalls Anderson. "It was like, 'there's another one to come,' so I could not close the chapter."

The sentiment is echoed by Anderson's psychologist, Nandi Herholdt. "Having to defend herself in court, having had her name dragged through the mud, her integrity questioned, her motives questioned, the nature of their relationship questioned – for her that was a lot more traumatic in the long term than the actual kidnapping experience itself."

Anderson was told Wheeldon's Victorian trial would have to wait until he'd completed his 11-year NSW jail term, only two years of which he'd served. But after Anderson contacted her local MP, then shadow attorney-general Mark Dreyfus, Wheeldon's extradition to Victoria was moved forward.

**In early 2018**, new legal teams, a new judge and a new police informant were preparing for Wheeldon's impending Victorian trial. By this stage, he'd been in prison in NSW for six-and-a-half years, including time spent on remand. He pleaded not guilty to the Victorian charges: four counts of rape, one of false imprisonment, one of theft and one of intentionally causing injury. On what was supposed to be the first day in court, however, he claimed he was too unwell to attend proceedings. He also suddenly changed his pleas to guilty. The trial was duly abandoned, with sentencing left to be determined.

A few months later, Anderson's mother in India was admitted to an ICU: she'd been ill for more than two years. "I had to choose which was more important, to visit my dying mother or to stay back for the sentencing," she says. Her mother died the day Anderson was due to fly out to see her, on July 19, 2018, so she wound up returning to India for a funeral. She came home to Australia in early August, when Wheeldon was handed a prison sentence of 13 years and four months. With time still to serve from the NSW conviction, a new non-parole date was set for early 2026.

During a plea hearing, Wheeldon's lawyer read out an apology from his client to Anderson. "I should never have put you through the trial in NSW and said all those things to hurt you in court," the text read. "I am left with the greatest remorse over what has happened, I was shown great kindness and then I returned it with great evil." He acknowledged that using Anderson's religion against her had been "inexcusable" and towards the end of the letter claimed to have found God. Anderson is sceptical of his religious conversion: "He would manipulate the system and do anything to get an easy way out."

Despite the apology, Wheeldon appealed his Victorian sentence, claiming it was "manifestly excessive" and that his case had been unnecessarily delayed. His appeal was rejected, the court noting he'd admitted to a prison doctor that he'd contested the charges "knowing that it would prolong the distress for the victim, in the hope of achieving a better sentencing outcome".

Although spared another trial in Victoria, the grinding legal process that had stretched across two states since 2011 had taken its toll on Anderson. She continued to suffer anxiety and panic attacks despite Wheeldon being behind bars. “What if he comes out? What do I do next, leave the country or change states?” If there had been only one trial, she says, “I would have been able to spend more time with my dying mother and been more present for my children.”

The following year, Wheeldon was diagnosed with leukaemia. On New Year’s Day, 2020, he was transferred from Port Phillip prison to hospital. His condition rapidly deteriorated and on February 18, 2020, Wheeldon died. He was 44 years old.



Since the attack, Anderson has set up her own charity for victims of domestic violence. “It feels good and also sad in some ways that there is so much need ... I’m contributing in a small way to make life a little bit better.” *CREDIT: PETER TARASIUK*

**News of Wheeldon’s** death drove Anderson into another health spiral. In the spirit of forgiveness, he’d been in her prayers, but she’d stopped praying for him around the time he died. “Suddenly I found I wasn’t praying for him,” she says, “and I thought perhaps I’d become a bit cold-hearted.”

Anderson is grateful for all the assistance she’s received, including money to help her move house and replace her car and other items, as well as funding for the numerous

medical issues she's suffered. For six years, she was able to access psychological support paid for by victims-of-crime services in both states. The support ran out before the court cases were resolved, but both states have since extended the availability of such programs to a decade.

Since 2014, she's been in regular contact with the office of Mark Dreyfus, pushing for kidnapping and sex crimes that occur across state and territory boundaries to become federal offences. She says she's disappointed by the noncommittal response from the now Attorney-General. In a written statement, Dreyfus's office tells *Good Weekend* that states and territories can come to arrangements themselves over cross-border issues, as WA, SA and the NT do already. Had these arrangements been in place between NSW and Victoria, Anderson might not have had to face two different legal systems. Dreyfus's office notes that "the Constitution does not allow for the Commonwealth to override this area of state responsibility". However a nationwide plan, agreed to last year by states and territories attorneys-general, promises to improve the way sexual assault survivors are dealt with. How all this pans out and how effective it is in future court cases remains to be seen.

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**When she was** leaving Canberra Hospital after the attack, Anderson had no shoes, and was offered socks and plastic bags to keep her feet warm and dry. The experience inspired her to set up her own charity for sexual assault victims, Thinking of You – from One Survivor to Another, which delivers care packages – underwear, socks, simple clothing, toiletries – to police stations and hospitals. Her home office is piled high with such goods, bought via grants and donations or given to her by friends and colleagues.

"It feels good and also sad in some ways that there is so much need ... I'm contributing in a small way to make life a little bit better," she reflects.

One of Anderson's regular ports of call is Viv's Place in Dandenong, a striking new 60-unit apartment complex offering accommodation and support services for at-risk women and children. *Good Weekend* accompanies her on one of her regular visits. "Hi, it's Gloria," Anderson says brightly into the intercom of the building, clutching three large shopping bags filled with toothbrushes, toothpaste, bubble bath, tampons and nappy rash cream. When she chats with staff, asking what she should bring next, she's told there are two newborns in the complex. Anderson adds nappies to her list. Her devotion to the needs of others has barely wavered despite her traumatic experience with someone who took advantage of her kindness. "I'm a little bit more cautious," she reflects, pausing for a moment, "but I'm still open, I'm still vulnerable. I still share my life."

**Support is available from the National Sexual Assault, Domestic Family Violence Counselling Service at 1800RESPECT (1800 737 732). The Men's Referral Service can be called on 1300 766 491.**

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