

Convicted baby killer Cutro remains complex figure, author of new book says

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COLUMBIA, SC Author David Hechler already had written extensively about child abuse when the prosecution of an Irmo daycare operator came to his attention in 1995 while he was on a fellowship at Columbia University in New York City.

A friend of Hechler's, who had been hired by the 5th Circuit Solicitor's office as an expert consultant in child abuse in a case against Gail Cutro. She told him he would find Cutro's case "interesting."

That tip would set Hechler on a path that would propel him through more than two decades of research, family interviews and extraordinary access to the Cutros and prosecution team. His 600-plus-page online book outlasted its original publisher.

"In Good Hands" is Hechler's account of allegations that Cutro, outwardly a mousy and gentle woman, could have killed two infants and shaken a third to the point of brain damage – all within an 8-month stretch in 1993.

It would take three separate juries before Cutro ultimately was found guilty of homicide by child abuse in the deaths of 4-month-olds Ashlan Daniel and Parker Colson. She was sentenced to life in prison. Jurors struggled but ultimately rejected her contention that

what happened to those babies was nature's vicious coincidence – unexplained infant deaths, which to Cutro was the worst kind of bad luck.

Once in 285 years – that is the mathematical likelihood that three infants would be hurt by chance in one daycare within a year's time, a University of Wisconsin statistician testified in Cutro's first trial.

Cutro still insists on her innocence, said Hechler, who interviewed her for hours behind bars at Leath Correctional Institution, the state's women's prison in Greenwood.

Q: What made this case particularly intriguing to you?

Hechler: “Distinguishing between Sudden Infant Death Syndrome and murder was one of the big mysteries and remains, really, a challenging obstacle for medicine and law enforcement.”

Q: You spent some 50 hours with Gail and her husband Josh. What about her character was unexpected?

Hechler: “I saw her being herself. I was able to see the girlish, winning personality that many of her supporters described – funny, engaging, charming. She seemed to be simple and calm. She isn't simple and calm.

“I saw a woman under enormous pressure. She was caught in this death match between her (controlling) husband and her (controlling) mother. They fought to possess her for decades. There was a time where there was a (literal) tug of war between Josh and her mother. One of them had one arm and the other had the other arm – she was the rope.”

Gail Cutro sometimes would lash out at her husband's bad behavior, Hechler said, like when he would cheat at cards. Josh Cutro, a behemoth of a man, has been charged with crimes several times and been imprisoned more than once. He was never convicted in connection with injuries to the children at the day care where he, too, worked.

The Cutros' marriage, which for years had a strong undercurrent of tension, ended in divorce.

Q: What parallels are there between Gail's life and that of her mother, Patricia Hallman?

Hechler: “Gail modeled her life like her mother’s life, dropping out of school, getting pregnant (before marriage), and she kept kids.”

Q: What did you learn about Cutro’s daycare that was not public knowledge during the investigations and trials?

Hechler: After Parker Colson died but before Asher Maier was shaken and Ashlan Daniel had died, a little girl at the daycare turned blue around the lips. Josh Cutro called the parents rather than an ambulance and said, “Come get your kid,” the author said.

The parents took the child to a doctor and she recuperated. “The parents never told anyone until they told me,” Hechler said.

Q: Did Gail Cutro ever say she hurt those three babies?

Hechler: “She never admitted anything. She always said, ‘I didn’t do it.’ She would look me in the eye and say that.”

Cutro, using what Hechler called “odd logic,” would say she was too busy running her in-home daycare to hurt the children in her care, Hechler said.