

‘Mountain man’ freed 32 years after kidnapping athlete to be son’s bride

Don Nichols grabbed biathlete Kari Swenson in 1984 while she was out running, then fatally shot her friend Alan Goldstein when he came to rescue her

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Self-described “mountain man” Don Nichols has been released on parole after serving 32 years for kidnapping a world-class athlete out on a training run in 1984 and killing her would-be rescuer – an attack that drew widespread media coverage and became the subject of a made-for-TV movie.

Nichols, 86, was sentenced to 85 years in prison for kidnapping biathlete Kari Swenson in the mountains near Big Sky and killing Alan Goldstein, a friend helping to search for Swenson when she failed to return home from her run.

Swenson, who was 22, said she was chained up during her ordeal and spotted her would-be rescuers before her abductors did. She yelled at them to leave because Nichols had threatened to shoot anyone who tried to help her.

Nichols shot Goldstein, and Nichols’s son Dan apparently accidentally shot Swenson. She said she was left for dead with a chest wound for hours as Goldstein’s body lay nearby.

Don and Dan Nichols fled and were arrested five months later after a manhunt in the mountains of south-western Montana.

During a parole hearing this April, Don Nichols, who kidnapped Swenson to be a bride for his then 19-year-old son, told the board members they would not regret their decision and he felt bad about his crimes. Board members noted Nichols’ clean record in his more than 30 years in prison and his completion of educational programs, including anger management and life skills.

Before a parole hearing in 2012, Kari Swenson wrote a letter to the Bozeman Daily Chronicle calling the father and son “crazy misfits” who chose to live apart from society and defy its laws.

“I endured being grabbed by both wrists, hit in the face, thrown to the ground, chained to Dan, threatened with knives and guns, marched through the woods, secured like an animal to trees and spent a terrifying night chained next to Dan,” she wrote.

She said she spent years in counselling and still had shrapnel in her chest that hurt her and brought back haunting memories of the ordeal that ended her athletic career.

Dan Nichols was convicted of kidnapping and assault. He was released from prison in 1991, though has been in and out of trouble with the law several times since then.

The case was the subject of a 1987 made-for-TV movie *The Abduction of Kari Swenson*, starring Tracy Pollan, and featured in an episode of Investigation Discovery’s TV show *Your Worst Nightmare*.

The Ted K Archive

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