



Aftermath of a kidnapping

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Geschke family deals with new fears, but also comes closer together in the years following Chuck's abduction

Last of a 4-part series

It was supposed to be a normal day at the office for Adobe Systems president Charles "Chuck" Geschke when he pulled into the parking lot of his Mountain View headquarters on May 26, 1992. Instead, his kidnapping at gunpoint by two Arabic men began a five-day nightmare in which Geschke was blindfolded and unaware of his location. His frantic family, in the meantime, enlisted the help of the FBI in a search that was the biggest of its kind since the kidnapping of Patti Hearst. Chuck's rescue was triggered by daughter Kathy's drop-off of ransom money and her negotiations with the captors. The news of the kidnapping made headlines all over the world. The family, still, has not fully recovered from the emotional harm. In the last of this four-part series, we look at what scars were left by the kidnapping, and how the Geschke family coped with them.



Photo courtesy of Nan Geschke

Chuck Geschke talks with Dick Held, FBI bureau chief of the San Francisco office, moments after Chuck arrives home from his kidnapping ordeal.

The Recovery

The kidnapping ordeal lasted five days, but its profound impact has resonated through many lives for five years and counting. Those lives include the Geschkes, their friends and associates, the kidnapers and their families.

For the Geschkes, the happy ending to the crisis marked the beginning of a lengthy recovery process, in which family members had to wrestle with post traumatic fears, insecurities and anger, and endure a lengthy court proceeding before finally moving on with their lives.

Living in fear

Less than 48 hours after his release, Chuck re-entered the same parking lot, this time surrounded by bodyguards and FBI agents, to give a first-person account to Adobe Systems employees, assure them that their lives were not in jeopardy and thank his friends, family and FBI agents for his release. After hugging and shaking hands with dozens of tearful employees, he exited the building.

"I felt very insecure. My eyes started darting around, my senses were all alert as to whether there was anyone walking around. I'm sure it was exacerbated by the fact there was this bodyguard who kept telling me he had to walk in front of me," Chuck said. To this day, he still has flashbacks when he drives into a parking lot void of cars or people. And he has replayed his capture dozens of times, both during and after captivity, questioning his decision to obey the armed stranger.

Initially, Chuck feared a third person was involved in the kidnap-for-ransom plot and would return to exact retribution for the capture of his two cohorts. His suspicion was rooted in his last day of captivity, when Rock altered his voice and pretended to be a third terrorist coming in to help out Rock and Steve. It would take some time for Chuck to sort out the details and realize there were just two abductors. Meanwhile, the FBI strongly suggested he hire bodyguards, which he did for four or five days until the family escaped to an East Coast retreat. "Having bodyguards was very intrusive on our privacy," he said.

At their own private hideaway, the location of which they wish to keep confidential, the family felt safe. They were anonymous, free from the pesky reporters who had tracked their every move in California. One had even crashed through their back gate in hopes of landing an interview. Three thousand miles away, the family could try to sort out what they had just been through. They joked about who would play each of them in the television movie. They resumed teasing each other, no mercy for Chuck.

"There were some tense times during the first couple weeks," Chuck said. "Each of us got emotional in our own way. We were just so fortunate to have that retreat. If we hadn't had that arranged, I don't know what we would have done. I don't think it would have been healthy to have just jumped right back in."

But they were not totally removed from it all. There were daily conversations with the FBI and attorneys. From time to time, the realization of the magnitude of recent events would suddenly sweep over Chuck like a tsunami consuming a bodysurfer. When he attended youngest son John's graduation from Princeton, for example, a faculty member asked Chuck if he had seen the day's Wall Street Journal. Chuck had not. The professor informed Chuck he was plastered all over the front page.

"It just completely unnerved me because I was so focused on trying to celebrate that day with John. It's a 'wow, this thing really did happen.' That just really brought me back."

If not for daily reminders, like the 400 letters and faxes from well-wishers around the world, there were also nighttime ones to haunt Chuck. He dreamt about life-threatening situations and in the split second between slumber and cognizance, he'd hear the click of the trigger. Since Chuck was blindfolded most of the time, he cannot visually recollect most of his captivity. But clicking sounds or heavy objects hitting the ground instantly evoke the feeling of being a prisoner.

The nightmares, which continue to this day, were just the start of a whole new deck of fears the family had to deal with once they returned to Los Altos after their month retreat. Chuck's insecurities about his safety invaded all aspects of his life. The 6-foot, 1-inch, 220-pound Chuck now scares easily.

"I see someone walking or parking in front of the house and I try to notice if there is anything suspicious about it. I never, never had that feeling ever in my life before. I've always been a very open person, never felt any physical fear of any kind," he said.

The uncertainty about accomplices tended to paint ordinary events with an air of conspiracy. A year after the kidnapping, two 20-something Arabics tried to pick Chuck's pocket in the Paris Metro Station. "I was very disquieted for a day," he said. "I felt very vulnerable." And when his recycling bin was tagged with graffiti during the trial, he was certain someone was trying to send him a message in Farsi. He called the police and asked them to have it translated.

Just last spring, Nan and Chuck were antique shopping in Paris when a man swiped Nan's wallet out of her purse. "It just brought the whole thing back," Chuck said.

Chuck is not the only one with lingering fears. The entire family's sense of security may be irretrievable. His daughter Kathy, son Peter, and wife have also lost some of their trust in mankind.

"I'm always looking over my shoulder. I'm always looking in doorways when I walk past, making sure someone is not going to jump out," said Kathy, 29, an interior designer. "I don't know if there is any place I can be where I can really feel safe. If it can happen to my dad, it can happen to me. That is extremely difficult to live with on a daily basis."

She, too, was the victim of another violent incident a year after the kidnapping. She was driving her friend

to the airport and while she was stopped at a light, a man tried to get into her car through a passenger-side window crack. Kathy floored it. The car-jacking assailant clung to the car window as she swerved for two blocks. He finally let go after his fingers began to bleed on the window. Before calling police, she called her parents, who insisted she move back home.

Peter swears he had weird phone calls and that someone stopped in front of his house late at night during the trial. "I'm just more suspicious of things," Peter said. He is now married to Diane and the father of a baby boy.

Nan, too, has had additional brushes with crime. Besides the Paris wallet theft, she endured a frightening incident a year after the kidnapping. In preparation for a dinner party, she raced to Rancho Shopping Center in Los Altos for a pint of whipping cream. She was in the store for only two minutes, but when she returned to her car it wouldn't start. A mechanic at the shopping center gas station told her someone had broken into her car. Familiar terror filled her body. She immediately suspected it was tied to Chuck's abduction.

For years, Nan had flashbacks whenever alone in the house. "It was mission control during the whole ordeal. Every room in this house has memories for me, so I am never really going to be able to escape that," she said two years after the kidnapping. The Geschkes did escape that by purchasing and renovating a house down the street, one a bit closer to town. "Even though it's a fairly well-known piece of property, it seems a lot safer," Nan said.

Beyond forgiveness

While the Geschkes struggled with their changed world, two other South Bay families were also confronting the kidnapping's aftershocks. "Every day I wake up and my heart bleeds for my brother," said Imad Sayeh, Jack "Rock" Sayeh's brother in 1994. "His face is not a criminal face. He was manipulated, brainwashed by a criminal." The two brothers, from a family of seven children, emigrated from Jordan to the United States in 1987. In court documents, friends described Sayeh as peaceful and honest.

Imad said his brother is immature, easily manipulated. "If I told my daughter, 'Let's go rob a bank.' I'll give her \$10. We rob it. Police arrest her. She's 7 years old. Do you think she knows what she did because I forced her or gave her cash? This is my brother. This is my brother."

Bernard Bray, the attorney who defended Sayeh in his February 1994 trial, also believes his client was an incredibly naive, unsophisticated young man, and said he was unable to comprehend how much trouble he was in for several months. Sayeh, 23 at the time of the kidnapping, had met Albukhari, then 26, only a couple months before.

Against the advice of Bray, Imad Sayeh took the family's remorse one step further, paying for a public apology to appear in the Mercury News. "We the Alsayeh family publicly extend our sincerest apology to the Geschke family for the kidnapping of Charles Geschke. We deeply regret the misdeeds of our son and brother, Jack, who perpetrated this senseless and unjustified act. Our family will live with this shame and guilt for all time, and we can only offer our deep-felt sympathy and sorrow to the Charles Geschke family for their pain and suffering," the ad read.

The apology coincided with the Geschkes' return from the East Coast. "My first reaction was anger that they were trying to go to the newspaper and evoke pity," Chuck said. "It may have been very sincere, I don't know. I just had this cynical point of view that he was trying to raise public sympathy for what happened." Chuck asked a friend knowledgeable in Middle Eastern culture to analyze it. He responded that it was indeed sincere.

The anger, however, was a good sign. Immediately after the kidnapping, Chuck was initially inclined to forgive his kidnapers. In fact, he wasn't angry at all and even considered funding scholarships for the kidnapers' children. After time and counseling, he now attributes that reaction to post-traumatic stress syndrome. "You've worked so hard to preserve your life that you actually become dependent on the kidnapper as something that helps you cling to life," Chuck said. It's a bond of dependency common among abused children and battered wives. Counseling helped him work through the emotional trauma and develop a more genuine reaction to the events.

"As I got through the trauma, I became angry, indignant and really offended by the fact that someone would allow greed to take them to the point that they were prepared to kill me and threaten and abuse my family, just for (expletive deleted) money," he said, a surge of animosity filling his otherwise composed speech. "How can money ever be that important to be worth that? I can understand if they were going to kill me out of some passion but just to kill me for money, I have no sympathy for that."

Albukhari, too, appeared repentant, opting to plead guilty to spare the Geschkes a lengthy court proceeding, his public defender, Tim Fukai, said at the time. Albukhari's wife, Safaa Bukhari, was eight months pregnant with the couple's second child and distraught and embarrassed when she learned of her unemployed husband's actions. She had met her husband at Santa Monica City College, where he was studying criminology. The couple had been living off their savings when Albukhari told her he was going scuba diving and fishing in San Diego for a few days.

Both Nan and Chuck spoke at Albukhari's sentencing. "I remember this feeling of fear when I saw him, though he was a very diminutive man. It was rather terrifying for me to actually see him and know what he had done," Nan said. Albukhari pleaded guilty, and his sentencing - life plus 20 years - was over within five months of the kidnapping. But Sayeh demanded a trial, and that took almost two years to resolve.

"We were not given the luxury of being able to forget about the case," Nan said. "To do a good job testifying, you just couldn't erase it from your mind. You had to do the opposite - remember details - because it was those details you would be asked about," Nan said. "You can't let it go because you're afraid if you do, your memory will play tricks on you or you won't remember an important fact and you'll be dismissed as not a credible witness."

Chuck did not anticipate how psychologically draining testifying would be. Though accustomed to speaking in public, the courtroom setting, the jury presence and Chuck's overwhelming desire to convince them of the truth translated into a level of nervousness he had never before experienced. "It was much like reliving a great deal of the stress and trauma of the original crime. Under the circumstances, it felt like I was a victim a second time," he said.

The jury convicted Sayeh of kidnapping, robbery and making terrorist threats, but acquitted him of weapons charges. He was given a life sentence but could be eligible for parole in 12 years, eight months.

Geschke spoke at the sentencing, requesting the maximum sentence, plus deportation should Sayeh ever be freed. He also told the court he is convinced that had the FBI not rescued him, he would have been killed. "There's absolutely no doubt in my mind that these two individuals planned to murder me," he said.

Attorney Bray and brother Imad disagree. Bray points to the measures the men took - blindfolding Chuck and lying about their names and lives - to protect their identities. This shows their intentions to release Chuck, he said.

The Geschke's emerged from the trial three years ago with battle scars ripe again. "That's where injustice really lies in terms of being victimized," Nan said. "It's not only the crime, pain or whatever ordeal you have to go through. It's the excruciating time it takes to bring a case to trial and how it affects the people who have to do the witnessing and freezes them in time so they can't get on with things," Nan said.

Though the perpetrators were behind bars, lingering questions remained for Chuck. "Why me? Why did I become a target? The kidnapers clearly invested some time getting ready for this - it wasn't a drive-by. I've never gotten a satisfactory answer to that," Chuck said. "I'm not sure I'll ever find out. That's very disquieting."

Nan's "why me?" stage was directed more toward life in general than the kidnapers. Everyone goes through tough times, whether it be loss of a job, child, divorce or health problems, but some people seem to be dealt easier cards. "I was just dealt a more difficult hand to play," she said. "I think you start to reconcile that you can overcome it. The alternative is to go kind of crazy and become depressed and despondent."

Over time and with justice served, Nan thinks the family will forgive the kidnapers. "In terms of their extended families, our hearts really do go out to them. They were innocent of these crimes but in their

culture, shame plays a big role. We have sympathy for them," she said.

Her children are not as forgiving. John Geschke, 27, an attorney, was not told about the kidnapping until Chuck was safe and sound. Since he didn't share in the week's roller coaster ride of fear, worry and exhaustion, he was not traumatized or scarred like the rest of the family. But one emotion rang clear. "I was so angry," he said. "It just disgusts me that somebody could be so greedy and that they had no respect for a life. For money, they could inflict that kind of pain. My first reaction was to make them feel that pain."

Kathy has become passionate in her views on crime. "For Jack (Sayeh), American citizens are paying to house him in jail and then he might not be deported. If he had done this in his own country, he might not be alive. It's gotten to the point no one feels safe to walk the streets anymore. Radar on kids. What kind of world is it to live in if you have to keep your kids on a leash to protect their safety?"

With time off for good behavior, it is possible the kidnappers could be eligible for parole in five years, said Geschke attorney John Gibbons.

That thought terrifies Kathy. "I think that will be a very emotional time for my family. How do we know they won't come back and try to contact us in some way? Even if it was good wishes, I just don't want anything to do with them. I just want to put it behind us."

New Priorities in Life

Society often views those who have close brushes with death - the lone airplane crash survivor, the couple who survives nine days in a Sierra blizzard - as enlightened sages who have learned the meaning of life by kissing death. It's a lesson they often try to teach others, but it doesn't really hit home unless you're a member of the club. And only a select few can join this club, usually against their will, by being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

The near destruction of the Geschke family has reprioritized what they feel is important in life. Nan, for example, has less tolerance for phoniness, status seekers, people who want to impress you with the car they drive or the money they spend. "When it comes down to it, what's really important?" she asks.

For the Geschkes, the answer to that is family. Always close, they are even tighter now. Sporadic family dinners have become Sunday evening rituals. "We're more aware of what everyone else is doing," Peter said. "Your family is more important than anything else. People were real concerned that we got the money back. We would have paid \$650 billion if we could have gotten a hold of it. The amount of money was not an issue."

Kathy agrees. "It has really made us appreciate what we have, the time we've had together and the time we'll have," she said.

John notices that the closeness is more open now. "We're not afraid to tell each other how much we care about each other," he said.

As for Chuck, family friend Marva Warnock said he is finally back to the same old person friends and family knew and loved. With one exception. "I think he values life and family and people that surround him much much more," she said.

Nan agrees. She tells of an ordinary day this summer, when the Geschkes' children and new grandchild would be coming over for dinner. Suddenly Chuck had tears in his eyes. "I can't believe I'm here to celebrate this day with all my kids and grandchildren," he told Nan.

"They are everything I live for," Chuck said. "Both what they did for me and how I feel about them. A piece of me is grateful we went through this. It's reinforced a feeling we all collectively have about how important our relationship as a family is. I think while we always felt close as a family, this has sort of reinforced that bond to an incredible level of strength."

When the trial was finally behind them, the Geschkes began focusing on the good that came out of all the pain and suffering. The near loss of life gave them a sense of urgency about following their dreams. Two weeks after the kidnapping, they found a spot on the East Coast to build a vacation home.

"We've been building something important to us for our whole family to enjoy," Nan said.

"That's been a saving grace for all of us," Kathy added.

Next they purchased their historic Los Altos home and began "rejuvenations." Then came three weddings, first Peter's, then Kathy's last June and John's in late summer, and one, much cherished, grandchild.

"Building houses helped. Between working and our kids getting married, and our first grandchild, our full attention is on things that are constructive," Chuck said.

"You feel there's been a new beginning, but with a sense of our incredible past," Nan said. "We've had a very interesting life. Our work isn't done yet. There are another few chapters that haven't unfolded yet."

But the kidnapping chapter is closed, Chuck said. "We don't sit around and talk about it. There are times when it tweaks up." Like when driving past the Monterey area recently, or while giving a toast at his daughter's wedding.

Sums up newlywed Kathy, "We have a lot of blessings. That's what we like to dwell on."

The Town Crier would like to hear from you about our series on the Geschke kidnapping. What's your basic reaction to the story? How do you feel about our telling it? Would you like to see the Town Crier take on such multi-part stories in the future? Drop us a line at 138 Main St., Los Altos 94022, e-mail us at: towncrier@losaltosonline.com, or give us a call after-hours on our 24-hour Feedback Phone, 948-9000, ext. 7. Thanks for reading.