

A JOURNEY OF HEALING  
OHIO MOTHER RETURNS TO PARK  
WHERE BEAR KILLED DAUGHTER

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Cleveland Plain Dealer, Publication Date: April 30, 2008

Susan Cenkus always knew that someday she would return to the waterfall in the Tennessee mountains, the place where her heart broke apart.

This month, the mother from Clyde, Ohio, made the difficult journey back. It was a warm, sunny April afternoon, so much like the one almost two years ago to the day when she visited Benton Falls with her 6-year-old daughter, Elora, and 2-year-old son, Luke.

On this afternoon, she was accompanied by her father; her 25-year-old son, Christopher; and Luke, now almost 5. Also with her were the men who tracked down the black bear that killed her daughter, seriously injured Luke and almost took her life.

Cenkus, her scars covered by a jacket and slacks, paused at the top of the 65-foot waterfall before heading down the rugged trail. At the bottom, forest workers would point out the spot where, bleeding and in pain, she called for help after the attack. They would show her where they found Elora's lifeless body. And where the bear started its relentless attack by first grabbing her son.

She thanked her escorts for the help and concern they had provided since that awful day. "We pray for you because you have become family," she said.

As she talked, Luke jumped across rocks at the waterfall's base looking for fish, unaware that it was where he and his mother were injured and where his sister disappeared from his life.

Cenkus, 47, smiled as she watched Luke play. "It's good to see him like this," she said.

Her father and others took photographs, just as she had that long-ago day, minutes before the attack.

The waterfall, which she discovered as a student at nearby Lee University, still made her feel peaceful, she told the men. Of course, she added, flashing a smile, the fact that they were armed and could fend off another bear gave her lots of peace, too.

Then Cenkus and her father and two sons stepped away from the others, sat on a rock and bowed their heads in prayer. Cenkus' faith had brought her such a long way.

### **Unprovoked attack near waterfall**

A couple of weeks before Cenkus and her family headed to Tennessee in the spring of 2006, Elora told her mother, "I may go to heaven before you."

Cenkus didn't think much about the comment. The two cuddled every night and said prayers together. God was as real to Elora as her mother.

"We never know when it's our time to go to heaven," she told Elora. "I sure hope you live many more years than Mommy. But if I can't be with you, the angels will be with you."

The little girl, whose name means "God is my light," loved to wear skirts and dresses — the pinker the better. She loved animals and insects, especially butterflies, and got upset if her mother tried to swat a fly. Instead of playing house with dolls, she pretended she was a veterinarian running a clinic.

Cenkus, Elora and Luke traveled to Tennessee to visit Christopher, a student at Lee University. Another son, Trevor, a high school senior, went, too. Her husband, Rich, stayed home to work.

On April 13, Cenkus and the two young children headed to Cherokee National Forest.

Cenkus regarded the forest as a dear old friend. She attended Lee in the early 1980s and had camped, hiked and picnicked in the mountainous terrain dozens of times. Not once did she see a bear.

She sat at the lake with her two children, and they talked about nearby Benton Falls. She had often told her children about the beautiful waterfall, but they had never seen it.

“Mommy, I really want to go,” Elora said.

As the family headed down the mile-long trail, Elora ran ahead, excited to finally see the waterfall she had heard so much about.

Cenkus took photographs of the children as they climbed onto the rocks. Nearby, another family looked at the falls.

Cenkus soon spotted a bear on a ridge about 100 feet away. She yelled to her children. It was time to leave.

Within minutes, the bear raced down the hill, across the creek and attacked Luke, wrapping a giant paw over his skull.

Cenkus yanked the boy from the animal’s grip and stared into the 200-pound bear’s eyes, praying it would back off. For a few seconds, it worked.

But as she turned away to check on her children, the bear lunged at her, sinking its teeth into the back of her neck. “Save my children,” she screamed to the nearby family.

I’m going to die, she thought, as sharp teeth and long claws ripped at her arms and legs. She heard her bones crush. The pain was excruciating.

She asked God to make her unconscious. Then she blacked out.

The emergency call came in about 4 p.m. from the other family who had been visiting the falls. Luke was airlifted to the hospital. Paramedics headed down to the waterfall, where they found

Cenkus on the ground, bleeding but now conscious. She asked about her son and daughter. Paramedics then realized a second child had been with her and spread the word to rescue workers converging on the site.

Cenkus was on her way to the hospital when rescuers spotted a bear in a thicket by a nearby stream. The bear reared up and growled and rescuers fired at it. The bear ran into the woods, leaving behind Elora's body.

Paramedics took off their shirts and covered the little girl's body. Another rescuer stood guard in case the bear returned and tried to carry the body away.

Within 48 hours a bear was trapped at the waterfall and killed. Tests showed it was not the culprit. A few days later a second bear was caught. DNA samples taken from its front claws linked the bear to the attack, and it was killed.

It was the first bear attack in the history of the Cherokee National Forest. Elora was only the second person on record killed by a bear in Tennessee.

Bear experts concluded the attack was unprovoked and predatory, given that it happened in the spring when bears emerge from hibernation and food sources are scarce.

Predatory attacks are extremely rare, impossible to predict and difficult to prevent, the experts said.

### **'God will give me strength'**

Cenkus lay in a drug-induced coma for nine days as doctors at Erlanger Health System in Chattanooga worked to save her life.

Her husband, parents and other family members stayed by her side, but her only memory during that time was a visit from an aunt, whose young daughter had died in an airplane accident years ago.

“I know you know what I am going through,” Cenkus remembers saying, though the aunt could not understand her. When Cenkus woke up, the pain of losing Elora was immediate and heart-stopping.

But she quickly formed a plan to heal her ravaged body and heart. She would honor her daughter and all those who helped to save her life by living with gratitude. She would take advantage of all the help available to get better. She would allow herself time to grieve.

Cenkus underwent seven surgeries, most of which she does not remember. Her left thigh and right upper arm had been severely gouged, and she needed therapy to learn how to use her arm again. She lost two major blood vessels in her neck and could barely talk.

Luke’s skull injuries healed quickly, and he was released from the hospital a week later. Cenkus left the hospital May 2.

A few weeks later she returned to Clyde Church of God, where her father, Gene Paul Sr., is pastor and she is a worship leader. He surprised her by asking her to come forward to sing.

“How am I going to do this?” she thought as she shuffled slowly up the aisle, her right arm bandaged and hanging limp. Her second thought was, “God will give me strength.”

She began singing, almost in a whisper, “Great Is Thy Faithfulness.” With each stanza her voice grew stronger. The church members wept.

## **Heartache of loss**

Cenkus has played piano and sung in church since she was a young child. She believes in a gracious, loving God and had turned to him for comfort during two divorces. But nothing could prepare her for the heartache of losing her only daughter.

“When the hard times come, you have to have a deep relationship with God,” her father said.

Paul became his daughter’s rock of support. For about four months, she and Luke lived with her parents so they could be looked after while her husband was at work. Father and daughter spent hours praying and sifting through memories, both painful and loving.

During that time, and later when she returned to her own home, she set aside 15 minutes a day to grieve.

Some days the sadness hung on, and she would slip into Elora’s pink bedroom and cry.

She met with a grief counselor and began writing in a journal. “I wanted to write all the memories down — I didn’t want to lose Elora,” she said.

Later she jotted down words of encouragement, culled from reading the Scriptures and a little book she still carries with her, “Hope in Times of Grief: Moving through Sorrow.”

She was not angry at God but wondered if she had done something wrong to upset him. “That’s not how God operates,” she decided.

Her husband handled his grief privately. He kept the household running while she immersed herself in reading about other families touched by tragedy, looking for clues as to how they moved forward.

She found a common thread: Rather than wallow in grief, they looked for ways to help others.

“I think that is the key to healing. I really do,” she said.

She has returned to Tennessee several times, to speak to

paramedics and other emergency workers. She attends these gatherings to thank workers for risking their lives to help families like hers.

“Everybody she comes into contact with, they are just amazed by her faith,” said Richard Taylor, area coordinator of the Tennessee Emergency Management Agency and now a close friend of the family. “She inspires you to be better.”

In her new job as patient- and family-care coordinator at Stein Hospice in Sandusky, she has shared her journey with patients and families struggling to accept death.

Cenkus agreed to tell her story to a reporter because she wants people to know there is hope in difficult times.

A registered nurse, she recently set up a Web site with another hospice nurse for those who might not be comfortable talking to a grief counselor. The site, <http://uk.youtube.com/user/eloraslight>, is called Elora’s Light.

Someday she plans to get a master’s degree in counseling so she can comfort families and children in crisis.

### **Healing is lifelong process**

On the first anniversary of the attack last year, her father visited Benton Falls without her.

“I wasn’t emotionally ready,” she said. But this spring, she decided she was.

“I think probably going back to the falls was the largest major step I had to take to heal,” she said. “That place is sacred to us because that’s where Elora went to heaven.”

A week after her visit to Benton Falls, Cenkus said she was grateful that her son appears not to have been traumatized by the attack.

One thing she had struggled with was thinking about what happened to Elora after she passed out and wasn't able to help her daughter. "It is time to put that in the past," she said.

Cenkus believes that healing is a lifelong process, but after her visit to the falls, she still had one more big step to take: to look at the photos she took minutes before the attack.

Forest officials found her camera and had the film developed in case she captured an image of the bear. They found none and gave the photographs to Cenkus' father.

Paul and other family members have seen the photographs. Cenkus has not, fearful of the anguish the images might bring.

With the visit to Benton Falls behind her, Cenkus said she thinks she is ready to look at the photos after she returns home.

Those who have seen the photographs say Elora's face shines with happiness.