

# Boston Sunday Globe

## A look at Bella before she was Baby Doe



Bella Bond. From top: Joseph Amoroso, Bella's biological father; Rachelle Bond; and her boyfriend, Michael McCarthy.

**By Patricia Wen, Evan Allen and Nestor Ramos**

October 4, 2015- Rachelle Bond was 36 years old and homeless, a drug addict and a prostitute, when she stood before a judge in 2012, desperate to stay out of prison.

*'Sometimes things can go wrong in a family very quickly.'*

Linda Wood-Boyle, executive director of Project Hope

Hauled into a Boston courthouse that day, Bond had violated every condition of her probation, including an order that she attend a drug rehabilitation program.

But Bond was also three months pregnant, carrying a baby she hoped would be her salvation. Sending Bond back to rehab instead of to prison, her lawyer argued, might be best for both of them.

“Ms. Bond is carrying a child who is voiceless in this particular matter,” the lawyer said. Born after Bond’s release from prison, Bella Bond would spend the entirety of her short life voiceless. Her middle name, Nevaeh, was “heaven” backwards, and only after she was gone — only after her unidentified body was discovered in a trash bag on the Deer Island shore — did the world begin to hear her.

### Inside the search to identify Baby Doe

Before her gruesome death, Bella Bond lived at the center of a chaotic swirl of adults who all failed her, according to Globe interviews with people whose troubled lives intersected with her own. Her mother’s fragile stability was shaken by the same addiction that had cost her permanent custody of two older children, they said. Even so, state social workers closed child neglect complaints involving Bella relatively quickly, betting on Bond’s capacity to turn her life around.

And, several friends and acquaintances who saw Bond during the summer say her actions in the wake of her daughter’s death belie the claim that she was held captive by the strange, addled man accused of murdering her feisty 2-year-old at bedtime.

Both Bond’s boyfriend, Michael McCarthy, 35, who is charged with murder in Bella’s death, and Bond, now 40, who is charged with being an accessory after the fact, have pleaded not guilty. Months after they allegedly dumped the child’s body in the harbor, prosecutors say, Bond finally told a friend that Baby Doe, the unidentified little girl on the billboards, was Bella, the beautiful, headstrong toddler who liked Hello Kitty and dressing up like a princess.

“Recovery can be very precarious,” said Linda Wood-Boyle, executive director of Project Hope, a social service agency in Boston that works with homeless families. “Sometimes things can go wrong in a family very quickly.”

Bella was conceived in a tent at Occupy Boston, according to her biological father, Joseph Amoroso. But soon after the judge sentenced Bond to jail time that day in 2012, Amoroso was gone.

A Florida native with an extensive criminal record both there and in Boston, he disappeared down South, occasionally posting photos of Bella on his Facebook page and talking to the child on the phone, but never getting involved in the girl’s life, according to several friends of Bond. He declined to comment for this story.

Bella was born healthy on Aug. 6, 2012, at Boston Medical Center, and for many months, the newborn and mother lived at a homeless shelter affiliated with The Dimock Center in Roxbury, according to several close friends of Bond.

Bond's defense lawyer, Janice Bassil, said Bella's mother endured significant "trauma and abuse" throughout her childhood and adult life, but wanted to put that behind her. She was committed to staying clean, Bassil said, and to finding a permanent home for herself and her baby. She received food stamps and monthly federal disability checks for her psychological problems, including post-traumatic stress disorder, her lawyer said.

Others who had known Bond as a longtime addict and prostitute saw a change after Bella's birth.

"She did everything she needed to do," said Toni Katsikas, 29, a homeless woman in Roxbury who was a close friend of Bond. "She wanted to do the right thing."

Still, there were signs of strain. In the first year of Bella's life, the state's child protection agency twice received complaints that Bond was neglecting Bella. While social workers found enough evidence both times to open a case, they closed each within a few months.

Officials with the state Department of Children and Families have declined to say who called in the complaints or give any details about their findings, including whether its caseworkers in Boston looked up Bond's history in Worcester County and learned that the state had terminated her parental rights to her two older children between 2001 and 2006.

But Bond kept Bella. Around the child's first birthday, with the help of a Section 8 housing voucher, they moved into a two-bedroom apartment in a newly renovated building on Maxwell Street in Dorchester.

At the well-kept apartment building, Bond excitedly decorated Bella's bedroom with stuffed animals and new furniture, said Megan Fewtrell, a close friend at the time. Bond hung purple curtains across the window in the tidy room. She gave the bedroom a monkey theme: They were Bella's favorite animal.

"Everything was for Bella," Fewtrell said. "Her future was getting a life for Bella."

Fewtrell said she saw Bella regularly, sometimes baby-sitting for the first year-and-a-half of her life, and said Bella's personality was like her mother's, spirited and energetic.

"She wasn't a timid, shy baby," said Fewtrell.

But Fewtrell, like many who grew close to Bond, was banished after a falling out in the spring of 2014. Soon after, Bond turned to another longtime friend, Shannon Taylor, and asked her to move in.

"The three of us were a family," said Taylor, a 42-year-old homeless woman who spends many nights curled up on sidewalks and in doorways near Copley Square.

When Taylor first moved in, her alcoholism was so bad that she would keep a bottle of liquor by her side at all times to ward off shaking and seizures. But Bella was always climbing into her lap, reaching for the alcohol, so Taylor quit drinking, she said.

Bond, she said, was on a low dose of Suboxone, a drug that curbs drug cravings and withdrawal symptoms. The two women smoked marijuana constantly, she said, but did no hard drugs. Bond was not working, said Taylor, but she was not hooking either. She had not been arrested while Bella was alive.

The Maxwell Street apartment was filled with toys — balls, stuffed animals, coloring books, picture books — and Bond and Taylor settled into a routine.

Bella would wake early, and Taylor, careful not to rouse Bond, would pluck the girl from her bed, change her diaper, and dress her in slippers and a pink corduroy bathrobe with a monkey face on the back. Bella would watch "SpongeBob SquarePants"; Taylor would cook her eggs or oatmeal. Bella zoomed around the apartment on a toy car, and she and Taylor would color or read together. When Bond arose, the women would take the girl to the park or go grocery shopping.

Bella was ebullient and curious, and Bond was easily irritated. She yelled at the child often. But Taylor's devotion to both Bella and Bond proved a stabilizing force, and Taylor said the women mostly stayed inside and played with the girl. They could not afford to visit the aquarium, Taylor said, but once they took Bella to Hempfest, Boston's annual marijuana rally. They took vitamins, read prayer books, and blessed every meal.

But about a year ago, just before Halloween, Taylor said, Bond got angry with her and Taylor was no longer welcome. She said she called periodically, hoping to repair the breach. When she called this April, Taylor said, Bond answered. “You got the wrong number,” Bond told her, before hanging up.

In January, Bond met McCarthy, according to friends — a strange, dirty man, those who knew him at the time said, with a raging drug problem and a fascination with demonology, conspiracy theories, and crystals with mystical powers.

He later told a former girlfriend that he did not particularly like Bond, but that she reminded him of a “modern Native American medicine woman” — a sign from his dead mother, he said, who loved Native American culture.

Taylor heard that McCarthy was a heroin addict and assumed that Bond was also using. Fellow patients at the South End methadone clinic where Bond went to get dosed began seeing her selling pills, her frame increasingly gaunt. Her Facebook page, once populated with pictures of Bella, went silent. Her neighbors said they watched a parade of wretched men file in and out of her first-floor apartment, and they often heard screaming matches.

Bella’s crying could be heard frequently through the walls of the apartment, the neighbors said.

Prosecutors say she was sometimes locked in a closet.

In May, prosecutors say, McCarthy became convinced that Bella was a demon. When she wouldn’t go to bed one night, McCarthy allegedly went in to calm her down. Instead, they say, he killed her.

McCarthy and Bond allegedly shoved her body into their refrigerator, then dumped her into the harbor. They kept the secret of her death — and her identity — for nearly three months.

Bond told investigators that after Bella’s death McCarthy kept her a virtual prisoner in her home, dosing her with heroin he shot directly into her neck. She claimed she was only able to free herself when McCarthy was hospitalized for treatment of abscesses on his arms from shooting up.

But many who knew Bond, and described her as an aggressive woman who spent years on the streets and fighting to protect herself, are skeptical.

During the summer, McCarthy called his former girlfriend, a recovering heroin addict, asking about crystals he had left with her. The former girlfriend, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said McCarthy and Bond came to visit her at her Quincy apartment.

When they met, Bond was calling McCarthy “hon” and touching him on the leg. Neither she nor McCarthy mentioned Bella. The former girlfriend said she never knew Bond had a daughter. They drove to a beach and McCarthy performed a Reiki healing ceremony on his former girlfriend, she said.

Bond stayed in the car with the former girlfriend’s sister; for a full 20 minutes, Bond was away from McCarthy and close to help. But instead of fleeing, she complained good-naturedly about how she had to placate McCarthy with lies when he accused her of stealing his pills. When McCarthy and the former girlfriend got back in the car, Bond seemed fine.

Soon after, the former girlfriend and her sister visited McCarthy and Bond at the Maxwell Street apartment. They talked about drugs, and someone pointed out the thick swarm of track marks on McCarthy’s arms.

Bond told the former girlfriend that her own arm veins were unusable. “The only place I can shoot up is in my neck,” Bond said, the former girlfriend recalled.

One exchange haunts the former girlfriend. Her sister, she said, asked for a drink.

“We have bottled water,” Bond volunteered. She opened the refrigerator where authorities say Bella’s body had been kept, and handed over a bottle. The girlfriend and her sister drank it together.

It was July. Bella had been dead for more than a month.

“That will never get out of my mind,” said the former girlfriend, weeping as she recalled how casually Bond moved through the space where her daughter died violently and alone. The apartment was clean, the girlfriend recalled. There was no toddler furniture, no baby toys, no robes with monkeys on them.

This was no place for children.