

When she was 21 Laurika Vermeulen was mistaken for a prostitute and thrown into a Port Elizabeth jail. She took the police to court, but the experience wrecked her marriage and almost destroyed her



'I WAS WRONGLY ARRESTED FOR PROSTITUTION'

"The first thing the policeman said to me was "Get in the van". He didn't explain why or say what I'd done wrong. Then, when I refused to obey, he started slapping my face and grabbing my hair. He hurt my neck as he jerked my head back, then pulled me by the arm and forced me into the back of the police van. Inside, there were four other women. One of them said to me, "You're being locked up for being a whore."

It was 11pm on Friday 13 May 2005, and I had been standing outside a nightclub, waiting for my husband to join me so we could go home. We had been

arguing that night, and I didn't want to go inside the club as it had a bad reputation – I'd heard negative things about what went on there. My husband and I had a two-year-old daughter and it was the first time I had dressed up and gone out since giving birth. What was meant to be a celebratory night turned into a nightmare that would last two years and break up my marriage.

The policeman and his female partner wouldn't listen to my pleas of innocence. I tried to show them my wedding ring and explain that I was married and that my husband was inside the club. I told them

he'd be worried when he came outside to find me gone. I even asked them to go inside the club with me, so I could find my husband and prove it to them. But they wouldn't listen. I cried all the way to the police station; all I could think about was my baby, I just wanted to go home to her.

When we arrived at the station, I showed the policeman my wedding ring again, but all he said was, "Does your husband know you are a whore?" Then he made me sign a document stating that I was a prostitute – I know I shouldn't have signed it but he threatened me, saying there would

be big problems if I didn't. I was scared. The official reason for my arrest was "loitering with the intent to commit prostitution". I was allowed one phone call but I couldn't get hold of anyone.

The jail was horrible. They gave me a disgusting mattress and blanket, but I didn't want to use them. There was no toilet, just a drain in the middle of the floor. I sat down on a concrete block and sobbed my heart out. The other women in the cell started getting fed up with my crying; they told me to shut up and stole my cigarettes. But I was so torn apart I didn't care.

I was worried I would be stuck there for the weekend, because you always hear that if you are arrested on a Friday or Saturday, you have to stay in jail until Monday. But at 3am the police told me I could go home; they even drove me to my house. If that isn't an admission of guilt, I don't know what is. They obviously realised I was telling the truth.

When I got home my husband was really angry, especially when he saw the papers I'd signed that said I was a prostitute. He screamed at me, "How could you do this to me?" But when he saw how upset I was, he softened and apologised. He said we had to make a case against the police, and phoned them to say we'd be taking them to court.

I didn't want to go through with it – I wanted to forget about it and put it behind us, but my husband insisted. Now, when I think back, I have mixed emotions about this – on one hand I'm angry that he put me through the drama of the court case, because it dragged on for so long, making it difficult to move on. It also made my story very public, which has been embarrassing and at times degrading. On the other hand,

I am grateful to him for forcing me to stand up for myself.

We went to see a lawyer and had photographs taken of my bruises: proof that the policeman had physically abused me. In preparation for the trial, I also had to see a doctor and a psychologist. The case only went to trial two years later and, even though we won, what happened in those two years was devastating.

I married my husband when I was 17 and he was everything to me. But after the arrest I became depressed and it started affecting our relationship. I had constant nightmares about being hit and being in jail. I didn't want to go out and socialise; I was always worried about the way I was dressed – did I *look* like a prostitute? – and I completely lost my sex drive. People I had thought of as friends who read about me in the paper accused me of prostitution, which was very hard to deal with. My self-esteem was very low and I felt like my life was falling apart. The final blow was when my husband started having an affair with my best friend – he said he was tired of me being boring.

It was all too much for me and I felt it was my fault that he had left me because I had turned into someone else. I couldn't bear to live with all the hurt, so I decided to kill myself. I tried three times, but each time someone found me.

'When I showed the policeman my wedding ring he said, "Does your husband know you are a whore?"'

I believe now that I wasn't meant to die and I'm glad that I'm still here for my little girl. There are moments when I feel like a terrible mother and can't believe that I wanted to leave Nicole behind, but when you're that low you aren't thinking straight.

When the court case happened in March 2007, I had the support of my parents and sister. The policeman who had arrested me looked straight at me and lied about that night. He claimed that he had never assaulted me but used force to get me into the police van because I had resisted. He also said that I had been flirting with him and that I had lifted my skirt. The judge put him in his place by saying he doubted this as I had been wearing a tight-fitting skirt. My mom started crying while he was testifying, and that was when something snapped inside me and I thought, "Right, now I've had enough. I'm not going to be scared and I'm not going to let people walk all over me any more." I felt strong for the first time in years.

I had claimed R600 000 from Safety and Security Minister Charles Nqakula for unlawful arrest, unlawful incarceration, unlawful prosecution, assault, injuries sustained and legal expenses. In the end, I was awarded R112 018,03. Although I'm happy that I won the case, the money can't give me my life back. What I really want is for the policeman to apologise.

But I'm looking ahead now and thinking about what I want to do with my life. I've actually considered training to become a policewoman so I can show them how they are meant to do their jobs! I am in a new, happy relationship with a man who treats me well, and I'm slowly picking up the pieces. ■