

# 95 Pounds Heavier, Angry Son Faces Mother Who Starved Him

By [RICHARD LEZIN JONES](#)

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CAMDEN, N.J., Feb. 10 — Bruce Jackson rose in a packed courtroom here on Friday, 95 pounds heavier and 15 inches taller than he was 27 months ago when he was found rummaging through a neighbor's garbage can looking for food.

Bruce Jackson, now 21, at a sentencing hearing in court Friday, angrily described the starvation and beatings that he and his three brothers suffered at the hands of their adoptive parents.

Bruce Jackson, the way he looked at 19, when he weighed just 45 pounds.

Vanessa Jackson was sentenced Friday to seven years in prison.

He looked directly at his adoptive mother, who was about to be sentenced to seven years in prison for systematically starving him and his three younger brothers in a case that drew national attention to the failures of [New Jersey's](#) child welfare system.

"You would make us eat pancake batter, dried-up grits and oatmeal, uncooked Cream of Wheat, and raw potatoes instead of cooked food," Mr. Jackson, now 21, told her and the crowded courtroom. "You didn't take us to any doctor's appointments. You wouldn't let us watch TV or play with our toys. You wouldn't let us take a shower when we were dirty."

He read from a piece of paper in a calm and determined voice betrayed by a slight slur.

"You yelled at us, cursed at us, hit us with brooms, rulers, sticks, shoes and belt buckles; I still have the marks to prove it," he told Vanessa Jackson, 50, who took him in as a foster child when he was 7 and later adopted him.

"I want to see Ms. Jackson go to jail for life," he said. "You were mean to me my whole life, so you deserve the same thing you did to me for the rest of your life. You took my childhood."

In a wrenching, angry series of personal statements that brought onlookers to tears, Mr. Jackson and his three brothers described publicly for the first time the horror of their life in Mrs. Jackson's Collingswood, N.J., home. Prosecutors said they were at a loss for a motive as to why the four boys were starved and abused while five other children in the house were allowed to live normal lives.

"If we knew why these kinds of things happen, we would be able to put ourselves in the shoes of defendants, in the shoes of mass murderers, in the shoes of people who do horrible things to young children," said Vincent P. Sarubbi, the Camden County prosecutor. "We'd have to become them, and that's why it's impossible in some circumstances to truly understand what may motivate people."

Ms. Jackson sat impassively in her chair, staring straight ahead, as the boys recounted their life with her and her husband, Raymond, who died in late 2004: their sparse diets of raw food, how they were beaten with brooms and belts and forced to stand on the occasions when they were allowed to eat. They never saw a doctor or dentist, and were never allowed to bathe. Bruce Jackson said his teeth became so rotten they had to be removed.

Mr. Jackson's brothers, who now live with adoptive or foster families, were present in the courtroom but their testimony was presented on videotape played on a monitor in the courtroom. They spared none of the details of

what was visited upon them in Ms. Jackson's home. Nor did they hold back their anger.

"When my new mom asked me what I thought, I told her that Ms. Vanessa could die for all I care," said Keith Jackson, 16. "I thought she should have gotten jail for life or the electric chair because she starved us and almost killed us. And she can't repay us."

Tyrone Jackson, now 12, recalled how he once threw up a dinner of white rice because he had been forced to go so long without food. "Man, I just wanted to kill you, I was so angry," he said. He ended his statement with a smile, telling her, "Good luck, and have fun in jail."

None of the children looked remotely as they did the last time Vanessa Jackson saw them.

Keith, who was 4 feet tall and weighed about 41 pounds when the boys were found in October 2003, is now 5 feet 2 and 126 pounds. Tyrone, who was 3 feet 3 and 28 pounds, is now 4 feet 4 and 66 pounds. Michael, now, 11, was about 3 feet tall and 23 pounds; he is now 4 feet 3 and weighs 63 pounds.

The most striking gains have been made by Bruce Jackson, who lives on his own in a residential complex. He is now 5 feet 3 and weighs 140 pounds. Ms. Jackson's daughter Vernee was among her four biological children who spoke in her behalf.

She said that the case had torn her family apart, and that her mother did not deserve to go to jail. She and her mother sobbed briefly before Vanessa Jackson regained her composure and resumed her stoic stare.

The Rev. Harry L. Thomas, the pastor of the Medford, N.J., church that the family attended and who has remained steadfast in his support of Ms. Jackson, also testified for her.

"I've known these people as very loving people," Mr. Thomas told the court, "people who have a heart for children and they have a heart for God."

But Judge Robert G. Millenky of State Superior Court was unmoved. He said Ms. Jackson deserved the maximum seven-year term because her conduct "fits the description of cruel activity."

"You had boys who clearly needed help," Judge Millenky said. "To do nothing in the face of serious problems demonstrates an absolute failure to recognize fundamental obligations."

He also faulted the child welfare agency, but deflected the attempts by Ms. Jackson's lawyer, Alan D. Bowman, to blame the system for the children's plight. "They in no way, provide an excuse for the decision made with regard to these children."

Several of the brothers' foster and adoptive parents also addressed the court. Keith's adopted mother, whose identity was not given to protect the child's privacy, described how the boys had to be hospitalized when they first came to live with her because "their stomachs were so small and not used to having substantive food in them."

She sobbed as she recalled how Tyrone, presented with a choice for breakfast, asked for tap water and dry oatmeal, and how the children would hoard food and "eat so much so fast the other kids would be afraid of not getting anything to eat. I assured them that there would always be enough food for them all."

She noted the progress that the boys had made through therapy and the help of social workers. "They are overcomers instead of being overcome," she said. "Victorious, not victims."

## 'You Took My Childhood'

By Kristen A. Graham    Inquirer Staff Writer    Feb. 11, 2006

Bruce Jackson laments his lost childhood. His 11-year-old brother wants the woman who once was his mother to know he loves her, but he doesn't like her. Another brother said that when he lived with the Jacksons, he was angry all the time.

And the 12-year-old said it most plainly.

"I'm mad at you," the boy said, wearing a suit, sitting straight up, and looking into a camera. "You starved me and I will show no mercy. How mad I am is three million acres long."

While the four adopted sons she admitted to starving looked on, Vanessa Jackson was sentenced to seven years in state prison yesterday. She will be eligible for parole in two years.

In a case that thrust her family onto an international stage and shone a spotlight on New Jersey's broken child-welfare system, Vanessa Jackson, 50, pleaded guilty last fall to endangering the welfare of her four adopted sons.

Authorities have said she systematically deprived them of food and neglected to seek medical care for them. In the three months after they were removed from the Collingswood home, they gained a combined 105 pounds. Two years after their removal, that combined weight gain is more than 250 pounds.

Her husband, Raymond, also was accused of starving Bruce, then 19; Keith, then 14; Tyrone, then 10; and Michael, then 9, but he died of a stroke in 2004.

Vanessa Jackson's attorney, Alan Dexter Bowman, suggested that she had "not an evil heart - a heart that was perhaps too big" and that the family was simply overwhelmed with the care of their large family of adopted, foster and biological children.

"Perhaps they should have been helped out a little more by the state, who came to see the Jackson home as a depository for problem children," Bowman said.

Jackson family defenders have maintained that the four boys had preexisting medical conditions that kept them small and sickly.

The most electric moments in the packed courtroom came when the brothers addressed Vanessa Jackson.

Bruce Jackson, now 21, spoke in person, and the younger brothers' statements were videotaped.

Bruce Jackson, who was found rooting through a garbage can in October 2003, shoeless, disoriented and weighing 45 pounds, spoke first. Though he has made significant physical and psychological progress, he lives in a home run by the state Division of Developmental Disabilities.

In a halting voice, he looked at his adoptive mother and frowned. She first smiled at him, then looked away.

"Miss Jackson, you abused me and my brothers," he said. "You wouldn't let us eat as much as the other kids."

He stood at the lectern and delivered a blistering speech with attorney Michael Critchley's arm around him. Except for its sharp planes and jutting jaw, his face barely resembles that of the startlingly thin young man in photographs released shortly after the starved boys were found.

"You took my childhood," he said. "I want to see Miss Jackson go to jail for life."

Leaving the Jackson home felt like liberation - liberation from diapers he didn't need, liberation from a diet of "pancake batter, dried-up grits and oatmeal, uncooked Cream of Wheat, and raw potatoes instead of cooked food," Bruce Jackson said.

The youngest boy smiled and rushed through his recorded statement. "There was a book I read about a mouse and a monster," the 11-year-old said. "You were the monster and I was the mouse."

The boy, who has been adopted by the same family that plans to adopt his 12-year-old brother, said he was happy now.

"I'm so mad that I feel that I want to hit you, but I love you because God says to always love each other," he said. "But I still don't like you. You thought that you were going to destroy my life, but God had another plan for me."

The 16-year-old talked of multiple missed meals, and suggested that Vanessa Jackson hid them from her husband.

"Sometimes we got OK food, but sometimes we wouldn't get lunch," he said. "Then Ms. Vanessa would make sure we weren't there when Mr. Raymond got home, so he wouldn't know we didn't eat lunch."

There was a wide gulf between the tearful testimony of Vanessa Jackson's biological children and that of Bruce and his three adopted brothers.

Raymond Jackson Jr. said there was no distinction between biological and adopted children at his house. "My mom is a loving person, despite what other people might say. I just don't know how - people can..." his voice trailed off, and he broke down into sobs.

LaRae Jackson, too, sobbed as she talked of her mother. "I would never, ever let anyone hurt my brothers and sisters," she said. "Even if my mom wanted to, I wouldn't let her."

Vanessa Jackson, who wore a tan, faux fur-trimmed sweater and matching tan pants, showed little emotion as the four adopted boys read statements. When her biological children spoke, she wept.

Keith's new adoptive mother - who at times had also cared for Tyrone and Michael - addressed Vanessa Jackson as well.

She outlined horrors the boys lived through - never eating at a table, not knowing how to bathe properly or play outside or deal with having enough food. She said they were made to read the Bible or sit on the steps as punishment, and that they disrespected women.

"One day while giving T.J. a choice for breakfast, he requested oatmeal in plain, unheated tap water," said the adoptive mother, identified only as Fulvia in court papers. "He was not used to eating cooked oatmeal. I explained to him that although Mrs. Jackson gave you that, it was not normal or healthy to eat uncooked oatmeal and I will cook you a healthy meal."

Last fall, a judge approved a \$12.5 million settlement for the four Jackson brothers, the largest award in the history of the Division of Youth and Family Services. New Jersey will pay Bruce Jackson \$5 million, and each of the other brothers will get about \$1.8 million. The payout settled a lawsuit that blamed social workers who visited the home for overlooking the boys' conditions.

A 14-year-old girl the Jacksons had adopted and identified only as K.J. in court asked that a statement be read at Vanessa Jackson's sentencing. She heard about the money her brothers received, she wrote.

She has been moved around to seven foster homes, and she has had lots of time to think.

"I think my parents made a mistake, I guess they didn't mean to do it," she wrote. "I guess they thought they must have been doing the right thing. I don't think she was trying to kill them."

## **The Jackson Case: A Time Line**

Oct. 10, 2003: Bruce Jackson, 19, is found scavenging for food in a neighbor's trash can in Collingswood. He and three younger brothers, all adopted by Raymond and Vanessa Jackson, are found malnourished and taken into state custody. Bruce Jackson weighs 45 pounds.

Oct. 24: Criminal charges of endangering the welfare of children and aggravated assault are filed against the Jacksons.

Nov. 2 and 3: The couple's pastor puts up cash and his home to bail them out of jail.

Nov. 12: The Jacksons go on national television to plead for their adopted children's return. State officials reiterate that the children have grown and gained weight by simply being fed a proper diet.

Dec. 3: Bruce Jackson weighs 70 1/2 pounds. His three brothers also have gained significant weight.

### **2004**

Feb. 12: A report by the New Jersey child advocate assails the state's role in the Jackson case. The Division of Youth and Family Services, the report says, failed the brothers "every step of the way" by not enforcing basic rules about foster homes. The report also has harsh words about the Jacksons.

May 5: A grand jury in Camden County indicts the Jacksons on 28 counts of withholding sufficient food, shelter and medical care from their adopted sons.

July 12: The Jacksons plead not guilty in their first court appearance.

Nov. 14: The day before a lengthy New York magazine profile of the Jacksons hits newsstands, Raymond Jackson suffers a massive stroke and extensive brain damage.

Nov. 30: Raymond Jackson, 51, dies.

### **2005**

October: Lawyers for the four Jackson brothers accept a settlement from the state totaling \$12.5 million. Bruce is to receive \$5 million. The others, about \$1.8 million each. The rest of the money goes to lawyers' fees.

Nov. 10: Vanessa Jackson pleads guilty in state Superior Court to endangering the welfare of a child by denying proper nutrition and medical care.

### **2006**

Feb. 10: Vanessa Jackson is sentenced to seven years in prison.

## **ONLINE EXTRA**

Read the victim impact statements of the four victims, the transcript

of the 911 call that saved Bruce Jackson, and more coverage of the N.J.

Child Welfare system at <http://go.philly.com/dyfs>

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## **Mother in starvation case gets 7 years in prison**

The four boys told of their torment and stolen childhoods at Vanessa Jackson's sentencing. She could be paroled in 2 years.

By Jan Hefler and Kristen A. Graham      Inquirer Staff Writers      Feb. 12, 2006

They were called devils; forced to survive for years on raw oatmeal, bits of raw potato, and cups of water. They got no medical care, schooling, baths, clean clothes, TV or playtime.

That was the life described by the four Jackson brothers, in their own wrenching words on Friday, before a judge sentenced their adoptive mother, Vanessa Jackson, to seven years in prison. She will be eligible for parole in two years.

The four boys were so hungry that they were forced to gnaw on walls. The churchgoing parents maintained that they were blameless.

For the first time, each of the boys publicly told of the brutality he had suffered under the care of a woman once called Mom. In court, the four referred to her as a mean, cruel woman. One said he wished she would die.

They recalled how they were sent to sit on a punishment step for hours while their mother's biological children were free to play.

"You yelled at us, cursed at us, hit us with brooms, rulers, sticks, shoes and belt buckles. I still have the marks to prove it," said Bruce Jackson, who is now 21. He lived with Vanessa Jackson for 12 years.

In October 2003, a neighbor found Bruce - shoeless, disoriented and rooting through a Collingswood garbage can. Police rescued him and three brothers from the home. At that time he was 19 years old, weighed 45 pounds, and was 4 feet tall. Today he weighs 132 pounds and stands 5 feet 3 inches.

Bruce described that home as a miserable place. Vanessa Jackson's defense lawyer said he was in "substantial disagreement" with the details of the boys' statements.

"You said we stole food and then you would starve us for a whole day," Bruce said. "You would make me wear Pampers during the entire 12 years I was there and I never had a problem wetting the bed."

He described how his teeth were "rotten, ground-down, ugly" and how Vanessa Jackson kept the boys awake until midnight, then had to "stay in bed until 1 or 2 in the afternoon."

The youngest of the adopted children - now a spry with close-cropped hair and a bright smile - described his upbringing.

"There was a book I read about a mouse and a monster," he said. "You were the monster and I was the mouse. You were the monster because you always mistreated me. I was the mouse because I never did what I wanted to do," he said in videotaped testimony.

The 16-year-old said his childhood was filled with anger.

"I had to sit on the steps and I didn't like that," he said, also in a videotape played in court.

His new adoptive mother said later that this punishment often lasted hours and that Vanessa Jackson would make them sit in their underwear while her biological children pranced past them to play.

Intense Bible reading was another punishment.

Mealtimes were especially difficult, the 16-year-old said.

"I was not allowed in the kitchen anytime. I could not eat in the dining room except on the holidays. I had to eat at the counter standing up in the kitchen."

The 16-year-old also said his adoptive mom wove a web of lies about meals for her now-dead husband to hear.

"Ms. Vanessa would do it when Mr. Raymond wasn't around. If he was around, she'd act like she was calling us in for dinner, but all she gave us was a cup of water," he said.

Often, the bowls and dishes that the boys used, he said, weren't washed.

The boys never took proper baths, said the 16-year-old's new adoptive mother. She described how he was afraid of the water in the tub. She said she learned that he had been taught only to wipe his body with a washcloth during the years he lived in the Jackson home.

The fourth boy, now 12, was filled with words to describe his anger.

"When I lived with you, I felt bored and sad and angry, mad, depressed, lonely, frustrated and tired, and ashamed, embarrassed, disappointed, and miserable, mistreated, uncomfortable, unsatisfied, discouraged, down and crushed," he said.

The stair punishment, he said, led to backaches and was meted out only to the adopted boys.

After the heartbreaking three-hour court session, Camden County Prosecutor Vincent P. Sarubbi spoke to the boys.

"I told the boys it took so much bravery for them to be able to face their tormentor," he said.

#### The Jackson Case: A Time Line

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Then and Now

Bruce Jackson, now 21

Oct. 2003: Height, 48 inches. Weight, 45 pounds.

Nov. 2005: Height, 63 inches. Weight, 140 pounds.

The second boy, now 16

Oct. 2003: Height, 48 inches. Weight, 40.5 pounds.

Nov. 2005: Height, 62 inches. Weight, 126 pounds.

The third boy, now 12

Oct. 2003: Height, 39 inches. Weight, 28 pounds.

Nov. 2005: Height, 52 inches. Weight, 66 pounds.

The youngest boy, now 11

Oct. 2003: Height, 37.5 inches. Weight, 22.6 pounds.

Nov. 2005: Height, 51 inches. Weight, 63 pounds.

ONLINE EXTRA

Read the impact statements of the four victims, the transcript of the 911 call that saved Bruce Jackson, and coverage of the N.J. Child Welfare system at <http://go.philly.com/dyfs>

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