

Dunk, dismissing her attempts to break up with him.

"It was weird," his brother said. "I used to tell him 'I've had a lot of women. We break up. We say good-bye.'

"What the hell did this woman have on him? Why was he possessed by her? Was she the last woman on Earth? I just couldn't understand it."

During the calm after the rape, Van Dunk told police, DeFreese described his feelings.

"Val, I love you so much," he said. "I loved my wife at one time, but I love you so much that no one else will have you. If I don't have you, no one's gonna have you."

Van Dunk grew up the shy one among more beautiful sisters, a chubby girl with thick glasses and curly hair who didn't draw the attention of boys, or succeed in school, as well as her siblings.

"She never had much self-esteem," said Rhonda Luke, her youngest sister. "She was more or less the ugly duckling in the family, especially next to Peggy."

Peggy DeGroat is the sister who confronted DeFreese, who called police, and who sat by Valerie's side at the police station. The closest in age, they grew up sharing their secrets and a single bed.

DeGroat was tall, pretty, popular, and assertive. Valerie was the opposite, and lived in her shadow.

"It was always me and her," DeGroat said. "I made friends, and she hated me for it."

Valerie found her first boyfriend at age 16, and was married, pregnant, and a high school dropout by 17. After a second child two years later, she had her tubes tied at age 19, DeGroat said.

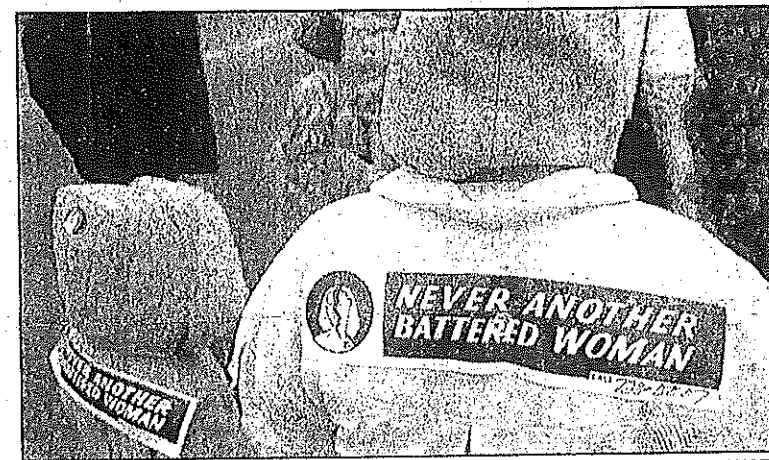
DeFreese came along several years later, and DeGroat remembers him being a smooth talker at first, always wearing a smile, treating Valerie like a queen and taking her for trips to Lake George and the Jersey shore.

"She really started looking good, started taking care of herself," DeGroat said. "He was nice



JOHN DECKER/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Marchers in West Milford in 1991 marking the opening of the Valerie Van Dunk Advocacy Center. The center, named for the victim of abuse, opened three weeks after her death.



STAFF PHOTO

Valerie Van Dunk's murder in 1991 spurred efforts to prevent future tragedies. Right, a memorial service a year after her death.

soured, and police began getting calls. Van Dunk's phone lines were cut. Her car was broken into. Someone invaded her house and smashed a table. She told her family and police that she suspected DeFreese, and that he had beaten

self when DeFreese threatened her.

"I said to Val, 'You are sick. And if you ever speak to him again, I'll never talk to you,'" DeGroat recalls.

But that didn't dissuade Valerie. She even accepted collect calls



al. She felt sorry for him.

To her sisters, Van Dunk sent confused signals during the year before her death. She moved to reconcile with DeFreese several times, but in the end, they are certain, she was just scared. She even

out," said DeGroat. "She was very clear about that."

Others aren't so sure. Before the rape trial, Van Dunk went to lawyer Frank Sciro for advice on how to get DeFreese off the hook.

"She wanted to reconcile," Sciro said. "It was bizarre. I guess emo-

To the family, the problem was not Van Dunk's emotional attachment. The problem was that the system failed to protect a frightened woman from a clear danger. Detective Shortway, prosecutor Ianarelli, and Van Dunk herself, all predicted DeFreese would kill her. Then it happened.

DeGroat is still angry. The police should have done something. The courts should have done something. And her sister Valerie should have put up a fight, if only for her two daughters.

Nearly two years have passed since the killing. DeGroat visits the grave, and when she's alone, she yells out loud.

"I'm mad at the system," De-