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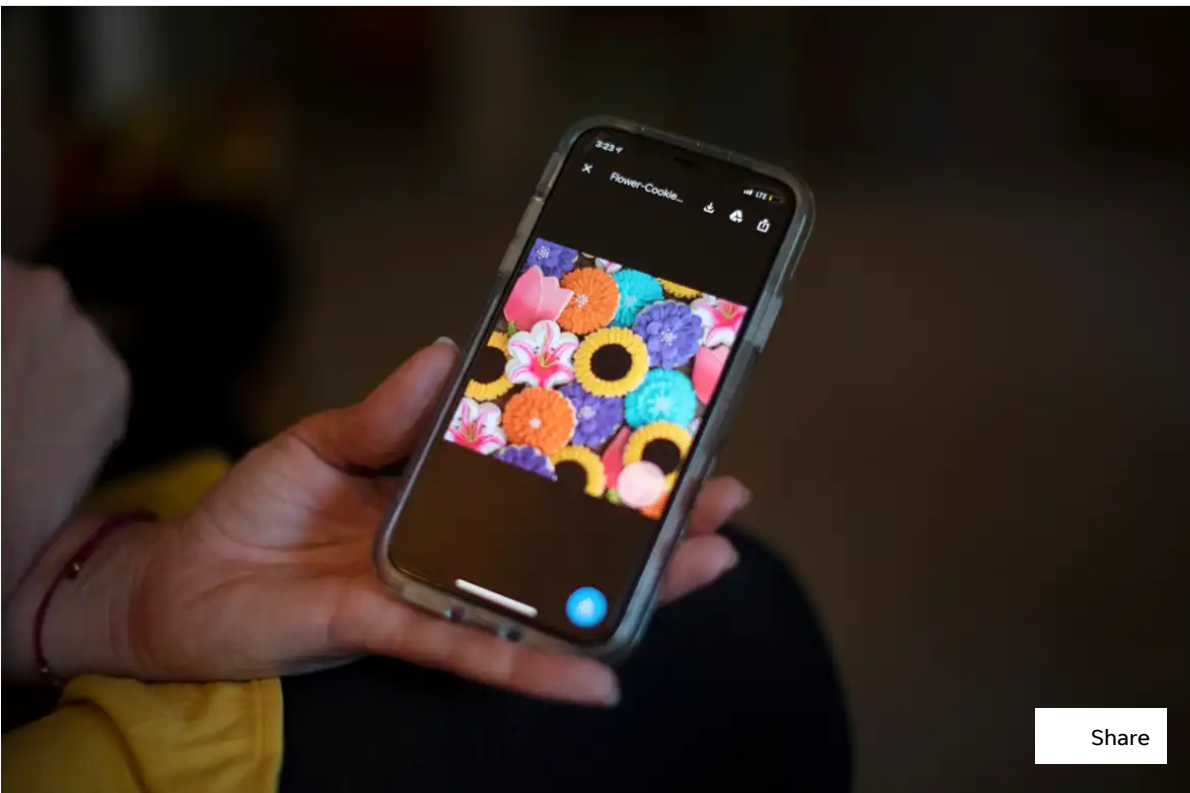
## Photos: Iowa baker tells story of being raped in her home

21 PHOTOS

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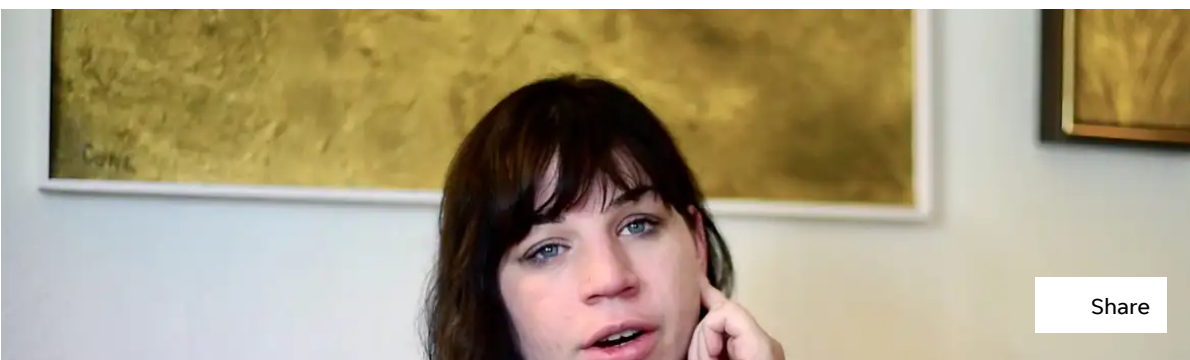
Justina Rucinski poses for a portrait in Des Moines on Sept. 2, 2019. Rucinski was assaulted and raped at gunpoint in her home and bakery business mid-August by an assailant pretending to pay for a cookie order. Following the assault, she says she is unable to be alone.



Rucinski received an email Aug. 13 from a customer placing a large cookie order, attached with an example of frosted floral pastries. The two exchanged messages discussing the cookie designs, and the customer praised Rucinski's work.

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Justina Rucinski gestures at the spot on her cheek where Mauck allegedly held her at gunpoint. The attacker had told Rucinski he was a masseur, she said.

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"You see these movies and documentaries of this happening ... It's so much worse when it's you," Rucinski said. If there's a hell, that's it—a demon knocked on my door, conned me, made me comfortable, then I was in hell."

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"(In 2012), it was my sister's sweet sixteen. I got this crazy idea to bake and decorate a two-tiered cake. I had no tools, nothing," Rucinski remembered. "It was amateur, you could tell — but I found what I was supposed to do. It felt like I was supposed to do this."

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Rucinski shows off her first tattoo, by Axton Upton of Lost Boys — one of her logo, gotten after her attack. The pain was oddly comforting because it was a pain she chose, she said.

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"I was always happy-go-lucky, always been trusting. Now I have to be careful, protective of myself. So many women have to hold it in," Rucinski said. "How are they coping? I was lucky enough to have the support I have. But they feel alone."

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A selfie posted on Instagram from May 2018. Rucinski dyed her hair darker shortly following her

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Rucinski's Nerf-themed cakes, seen in February of 2018 then May of 2019. Rucinski frequently posts 'progress' photos of her creations to show her progress.

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Rucinski, a self-taught baker who operated Sweetems Cakery & Cookies out of her Burlington home, advocates changing Iowa's cottage laws, which allows home cooks to sell almost any kind of non-perishable food without special licensing—however, products can only be sold from a residence or farmers market.

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"I grew that business from the ground up," Rucinski said. "It was like I had another kid, really. I'm struggling with the fact that my business hurt me. I know I shouldn't think that, but it did in some way. That's how I was so trusting of him—because of my business I love so much."

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An older cookie creation of Rucinski's from April 2018.

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Rucinski has stayed at a friend's residence immediately following the assault.

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"I'll never forget when he put that gun to my head," Rucinski said. He made me so calm and collected ... I told him, 'I feel like I met you for a reason ... You're so kind, you don't find that anymore. This is helping my family a lot.'"

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NASA and Noah's Ark-themed cakes made by Justina Rucinski.

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The cake Rucinski made for her sister's sixteenth birthday in 2012, alongside a similar one made in 2019.

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"If he takes away my business, he wins," Rucinski said. "I'm going to fight, but it'll take a little bit. Anyone who knew me knew I was so proud of my business. I was able to leave retail."

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On baking, Rucinski said, "Everyone starts somewhere. Even though I think I'm doing great, now, in a year I'll be better—life is a learning experience."

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“It ends with me,” Rucinski said. “How I explain it is: I’m in this very dark room, and all I see is this sliver of light — the love and comfort I’ve been given. But it’s still very, very dark.”

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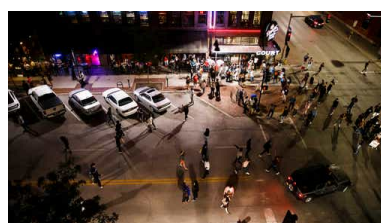
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