

## Justice Story: John Jamelske, the Ariel Castro of Syracuse, held 5 women and girls captive

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John Jamelske, of DeWitt, N.Y., held five women and girls captive before he was caught in 2003.

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 John Jamelske, a scruffy bottle-picker from Syracuse, regarded himself as smooth with the ladies.

To the rest of the world, he was a kidnapper and sexual predator.

Before there was Ariel Castro, Cleveland's industrious triple kidnapper, there was Jamelske, New York's dungeon dragon.

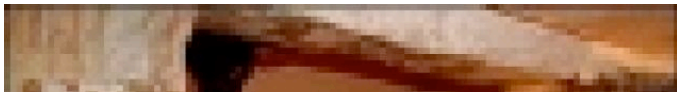
For 15 years beginning in 1988, he held a succession of females as sex slaves in a filthy bunker beneath his house in upstate DeWitt. Jamelske was finally busted on April 3, 2003, three weeks before Castro kidnapped Amanda Berry, the second of his three victims.

Castro seemed shamed by his arrest. Jamelske, on the other hand, claimed his victims were "buddies." He said he chained them "only a tiny little" and saw himself as "a tremendous influence" on them.

"No, I never considered anybody a kidnap victim," he told the Syracuse Post-Standard. He explained that kidnappers demand cash ransoms. He didn't do that.

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"I figured it's like detaining somebody or unlawful imprisonment or something like that," he said.



The law disagreed, and convicted kidnapper Jamelske, 78, is living out his life in prison.



*John Jamelske built a two-room concrete bunker under the back yard of his suburban Syracuse home.*

His case didn't get the national attention of the dramatic escape of the three women in Cleveland earlier in May, but Jamelske's story is just as implausible.

Though he described himself as "a little bit crazy," Jamelske had a rather ordinary life until he reached his 50s.

He was married with three sons, had a community college degree, and worked at grocery stores in the Syracuse area, where he grew up.

His life turned in the 1980s. He lost his job and began scavenging for bottles and cans. His hoarding tendencies flourished as he stacked his house floor to ceiling with cast-off crap. (Police counted 13,000 bottles in his house.)

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Jamelske had another momentous life event in the 1980s: He had an open affair with a teenager, whom he brought to family functions — as his wife sat by awkwardly.

That relationship apparently inspired illicit carnal ideas.



*KEVIN RIVOLI/ASSOCIATED PRESS One of the rooms that Jamelske dug out through the wall of his basement contained a crude bed made of wood and a portable chair. The 12-foot by 12-foot room was lit by a single light bulb.*

Jamelske began cruising in his distinctive vintage Mercury Comet, seeking females from the wrong side of the tracks.

And he built a 12-by-24 foot bunker accessible through a crawl space behind a hidden door in his garage. He told busybodies it was a storm shelter. It featured a plastic bucket toilet, a filthy foam cushion as a bed, and a salvaged bathtub filled with cold water from a garden hose.

In September 1988, he lured a 14-year-old girl into his car and secreted her in the dungeon for two years. The girl was reported missing by her family, and they were shocked when she came home in 1989. The victim later said Jamelske

had threatened to kill her brother, so she lied and said she had run away from home.

In 1995, Jamelske abducted a second 14-year-old. For two years, he subjected the teen to daily sexual assaults — all while his wife, ill with cancer, was upstairs. He freed that victim in 1997, again with a threat if she squealed.

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The girl told her mother she had been kidnapped and raped by an older man, but she was so terrified the crime was never reported.

The third victim, abducted and confined later in 1997, was a 53-year-old Vietnamese immigrant. She was held for five months. She went to police but said cops were skeptical of her allegations and only made a cursory investigation.

In 2001, after Jamelske's wife died, he grabbed a fourth victim, a single mother, 26. She hurried to police when she was released after two months. She didn't know Jamelske's name or address (he blindfolded his victims when coming and going to his house) but gave cops a golden clue: She said his car was a 1975 Mercury Comet.



There was only one in the Syracuse area, but it was owned by a law-abider, not Jamelske. His car was a '74. Police didn't bother to broaden their records search.

In October 2002, Jamelske snared another victim, a 16-year-old girl, whom he nicknamed Meikka.

Jamelske was 67 then, and the sex fiend needed chemical help with his manhood. He popped a daily Viagra to maintain an obsessive rape regimen.

*KEVIN RIVOLI/ASSOCIATED PRESS* Jamelske's victims were forced to use dirty tub and crude toilet in dungeon rooms he built below ground.

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He also began to imagine that Meikka was his friend.

He allowed her out of the bunker and into his home, though he kept padlocks on potential escape routes. Then he began to take her on outings — to a bowling alley, bottle redemption centers, and a local bar where she sang karaoke.

During a bottle run on April 9, 2003, Meikka managed a brief phone call to her sister. Shortly, Jamelske was in handcuffs — at last — and his other victims came forward.

There was one more twist: The skinflint Jamelske — who'd argue over a nickel, according to his own son — was a millionaire.

He had inherited money and enjoyed a six-figure payday when a developer bought the land around his DeWitt house to build luxury homes. His money, which he had invested in real estate, went to his victims.

After months of parsing, Jamelske grudgingly said, "I did some wrong things."