

# RECLAIMING THE NARRATIVE, RECLAIMING THE SPOTLIGHT JESSIE BUTTAFUOCO'S RISE FROM SURVIVAL TO SCHOLAR

BY CATHERINE RYAN



Under the studio lights, Jessica “Jessie” Buttafuoco sits on the couch beside Drew Barrymore, the two women’s hands laced together. It’s an image that feels surreal if you remember the 1990s: Barrymore once played Amy Fisher in the TV movie *The Amy Fisher Story*, dramatizing the true story of a troubled teenager who shot Jessie’s mother in the face in 1992, hurling Jessie’s family into tabloid infamy. Jessie was nine years old at the time.

The Buttafuoco story was, in many ways, the moment a single violent crime turned into a national spectator sport—and helped teach America to treat true crime as entertainment. In 1992, when 17-year-old Amy Fisher shot Mary Jo Buttafuoco on her suburban Long Island doorstep over the teenager’s illicit relationship with Mary Jo’s husband, Joey, the case had all the elements tabloids crave: sex, violence, betrayal, and a family with a memorable last name.

What made it historic was what came next: a feeding frenzy of talk shows, tabloid covers, late-night jokes, and competing TV movies that recast real people as characters in an endlessly replayed drama. The so-called “Long Island Lolita” saga reflected the rise of a new media ecosystem and helped create the template for modern true crime culture, where ratings, punch lines, and narrative twists often overshadow the real human cost.

## From Media Subject to Media Scholar

It was just a few months ago when Barrymore invited Jessie onto her television talk show—no longer as a character being portrayed, but as a mental health professional who is rewriting the script on the impacts of true crime media. And what Jessie is also talking about, in the media spotlight, is graduate school.

In November, Jessie earned her MA in Media Psychology from Fielding and is now working toward her Fielding PhD in Media Psychology. Her dissertation research focuses on the psychological

impact of true crime media on victims and their families and what it means to build an ethical, trauma-informed future for the genre that once nearly destroyed her.

“For most of my life, my story was told for me,” Jessie tells *FOCUS* magazine. “It was picked apart, sensationalized, and exploited in ways I never asked for and certainly never consented to.”

If you flip from Jessie’s recent appearance on *The Drew Barrymore Show* to the 2025 *Vanity Fair* feature story about her, readers learn that after earning her MA in Clinical Psychology and working as a therapist, “Jessie found what she’d been looking for: a rare doctoral program in media psychology at Fielding Graduate University in Santa Barbara.”

No longer willing to define herself through the family’s notoriety, Jessie was seeing herself anew. “I’m fucking really smart,” she told *Vanity Fair*, “and I have something to say.” Her Fielding application, she explained to *Vanity Fair*, practically wrote itself. “This is who my parents are,” she said, “and this is why I want to change true crime.”

Jessie lives in the Los Angeles area, sharing a home with her mother, Mary Jo, now in her 70s, who survived the shooting and still endures its physical and emotional aftermath. (In January 2026, a Lifetime film about Mary Jo’s life premiered, *I Am Mary Jo Buttafuoco*.)

Across Jessie’s recent interviews and podcast appearances, the focus has shifted to Jessie as a changemaking scholar-practitioner, therapist, and doctoral student working to reshape media ethics for other victims and survivors—a mental health professional and true crime media specialist with an MA in Clinical Psychology, an MA in Media Psychology, and the immediate goal of graduating with a Fielding PhD in Media Psychology.

## Transforming Trauma Into Purpose

As a child, Jessie watched comedians, late-night hosts, and tabloids turn her family’s trauma into national entertainment. Headlines reduced a complex crime to a catchy moniker. The “Buttafuoco story” became shorthand for scandal, replayed across news, talk shows, and, later, podcasts and docuseries.

“The sensationalized storytelling itself was part of the harm,” she explains to *FOCUS*. “I realized my personal pain was part of a much larger problem: the way our society treats victims and survivors as entertainment.”

That realization became a turning point. “I began to see that my

experience was a lens, a platform, and ultimately a calling,” she says. “I knew I wanted to help change how stories like mine are told.”

The shift deepened when Jessie discovered media psychology.

“Finding this field was the moment everything *clicked*,” she says. “For the first time, I found academic language for what I had lived through—the cycles of retraumatization, the impact of repetition and framing, the erosion of agency through sensational storytelling.”

### **Fielding: Lived Experience Meets Empowerment**

“What led me to Fielding,” Jessie explains, “was the realization that I didn’t have to pretend my personal history wasn’t part of my academic path. Fielding’s Media Psychology program offered rigorous academic training grounded in empathy, humanity, and real-world impact,” she says.

“But what has truly kept me here—what has made me believe I *belong* here—is the people. Starting a PhD program at 40, in a field where I’m learning entirely new research skills, hasn’t always been easy. I’ve doubted myself more times than I’d like to admit. And every single time, the faculty and staff have met me with support, kindness, and constructive guidance.”

Jessie shares that Fielding’s commitment has proved deeply personal, from check-ins from Fielding’s Dean of Faculty Brian Cutler, PhD, to caring guidance from Student Life and Thriving staff including Tim Yamasaki, to the mentorship of Media Psychology faculty member Karen Shackelford, PhD, who Jessie calls her “anchor.”

### **From Tabloid Subject to Scholar-Practitioner**

Jessie describes working in Shackelford’s research lab as learning to walk again—this time in the world of data and design, variables, and validity.

“I still can’t quite believe I get to learn from someone who literally wrote the textbook on media psychology,” she says. “Being part of Dr. Shackelford’s lab has given me hands-on experience I never imagined I’d have. I’ve learned how to think, question, analyze, and design research in ways that feel both challenging and deeply empowering.”

Jessie says that Shackelford’s mentorship as dissertation chair has given her “confidence in my mission and clarity in the impact I want to have. She helped me turn a personal calling into a scholarly pursuit—and, ultimately, into a vision for changing how true crime media treats the very people whose stories it claims to tell.”

Shackelford is equally emphatic about what Jessie brings. “I adore Jessie as a person,” she says. “I am in awe of her for the beautiful, graceful way she has handled her unique and difficult family situation since she was a child. As she said on the *Drew Barrymore Show*, her name enters the room before she does. She is courageous in sharing the story of how that pressure and infamy almost killed her, though none of it was her fault. She’s a beautiful, brilliant person who has a passion for making other people’s lives better.”

### **The True Cost of True Crime**

Jessie aims for her research to clearly expose “the very real harm sensationalized storytelling can cause, while also offering a path forward.”

She will present her Fielding work, *The True Cost of True Crime*,

this April at the Popular Culture Association’s annual conference. Around the same time, she will appear in a new ABC/Hulu series based on her life, told through what she describes as “an empathetic and empowering lens.”

Jessie says her scholarship at Fielding also enriches her ongoing work as a therapist at a treatment center in Los Angeles and in her private counseling services, offered through her website, [JessieButtafuoco.com](https://www.JessieButtafuoco.com). Her clinical work, her research, and her advocacy also feed into the unique business she just launched: Mental Health Media Services, a media consultancy aiming to make entertainment safer for the people whose stories power it.

“It’s a long road,” she acknowledges. “So much systemic change needs to happen in the entertainment industry before advocates like me start getting hired regularly.”

But she has a clear picture of where that road could lead: being on set as a mental health coordinator for true crime and reality productions; serving as a trauma-informed liaison for victims, survivors, and co-victims of crime; consulting on scripts and storylines to ensure that stories are told *with* people, not just *about* them.

Over the past few months Jessie’s already made notable headway changing the narrative surrounding her own story as she reemerges into the national spotlight.

She also aims to help craft legislation that protects the mental health of victims and survivors in the media. “I want to help build a world where victims are consulted, protected, compensated, and respected,” she says, “where creators understand trauma and center humanity over sensationalism, and where future survivors and their families never have to endure what so many of us did.”

### **Redefining Identity — Beyond Survival**

“I talk about moving from ‘survival’ to purpose,” Jessie says, “because I’ve lived in the darkest corners of what the media can do to a person.”

The decades of retraumatization—jokes, reruns, reboots, led her to spiral into depression, addiction, suicidality, and a sense of complete brokenness. Climbing out of that place required therapy, recovery programs, and the deliberate work of rebuilding a self that had been flattened by characterization, she says.

“Becoming a mental health professional wasn’t just a career choice,” Jessie adds. “It was a lifeline. I made a promise to myself that no one else would have to drown the way I did. Academic inquiry gave me distance, perspective, and a language for emotions and experiences I once struggled to articulate. Research helped me reclaim authorship of my life by helping me understand it.”

Jessie’s message to Fielding students is simple:

“Lead with heart. Ground your mission in real scholarship. And trust that your lived experience is not a barrier to impact—it’s a source of power.”

Jessie is no longer the child in the background of a national spectacle. She is the expert in the frame, the scholar at the mic, the survivor setting the terms. Her story has a new, empowering narrator: herself.