

I SPEAK FOR THIS CHILD: TRUE STORIES OF A CHILD ADVOCATE

BY GAY COURTER

WHAT HAPPENED TO MY GUARDIAN CHILDREN?

(AS OF SEPTEMBER, 2001)



Perhaps the greatest social service that can be rendered by anybody to the country and to mankind is to bring up a family.

—George Bernard Shaw

Readers often ask what happened to the various children and families featured in *I Speak for This Child: True Stories of a Child Advocate*. Just the fact that they care—as I still do—speaks to the humanity in all of us. Even those who are not volunteers worry over children without permanent, loving homes.

After 12 years, I am still an active Guardian ad Litem in my Florida community. I've had cases continuously, with only a month or two off due to travel. As I write, I am working for a baby whose mother is in prison and whose father does not want her. Hopefully she will be adopted by a relative that I—not the social service agency—found in another state. My other toddler is about to be reunited with her father, just released from prison, and I am hopeful that with some support she will thrive in his loving arms.



Lydia Ryan (“The Girl Who Loved Robert Frost”) and I were in close touch for several years. As the book ended, she had just confided in me that she was pregnant, and she said, “I don’t want to raise a child the same way I was raised...I am determined to love my baby the right way.” Sadly, determination was not enough. In training guardians are taught about the cycle of abuse and how powerless victims often grow into powerful abusers. Knowing this, I wanted to help Lydia as much as I could. I stayed in touch throughout her pregnancy, bringing her and her boyfriend, Nick, food baskets, and visiting frequently when baby Nathan was born. When Nathan was two months old, Lydia told me that Nick had been having jealous rages and she was afraid of him. He had beaten her once during the pregnancy and the police had been called and warned him that attacking a pregnant woman was an even greater offense than a regular assault, but now he was back to his old ways. Even though her relations with her parents had thawed, they wouldn’t allow her to move back home with her the baby. After talking it over with my husband, we agreed to offer them our spare bedroom. We helped Lydia find a job as a part-time medical receptionist and told her that her only responsibilities were to take care of Nathan, their laundry, her room, and she save her earnings toward moving out on her own when she was ready. We worked out a budget that made this possible in three months. The only other condition was that she was to stay away from Nick.

After less than a week, Lydia quit the job. The doctor reported that she came in late most days and left early with “emergencies.” She said they were unfair and mean. She neglected Nathan at our house, knowing that my husband or I would pick him up if he fussed or make a fresh bottle. Gentle hints on parenting were ignored. Lydia defended her passivity by claiming she did not want to “spoil the baby.” A few nights she asked if she could “run to the store” with her friends while Nathan slept, but returned

hours later. One night she didn't come back until dawn. We suspected she was out with Nick, but she denied it. Soon Nick was coming around to visit his son. Lydia swore that he had changed. When we told her that we would not baby-sit so she could spend the night with Nick—or anyone else—she disappeared with the baby for a few days. At that point we “loaned” her the money for the first and last month's rent for a trailer in a safe neighborhood and she moved out. A few weeks later Nick moved back in.

Because I had never become overtly angry with her, our relationship continued and I visited often. Eventually Nick moved out again, Lydia and Nathan moved in with friends and she stored some possessions in a garage we rented. I'd see her from time to time at the fast food restaurant where she worked for a year and once in a while she would drop by to show off Nathan's progress—once at midnight. When she moved two hours away, I'd hear about her from a mutual friend who worked at our local convenience store.

Then one day, when Nathan was three, Lydia called in a panic. She had been separated from Nick for almost two years and he had married someone else. Nathan was living with his father but she had custody on weekends. The previous week Nathan had refused to mind and she had spanked him hard enough to leave bruises. When she returned him to his father, Nick had called child protective services and lodged an abuse complaint against Lydia. “What should I do?” she wailed.

My heart filled with lead as I talked her through the legal steps she should take including promptly enrolling in parenting and anger management classes even before a court ordered them. Lydia further admitted she often smacked Nathan when he talked back, dawdled, or refused to mind. I gave her some positive parenting strategies that were suitable for his age, and again encouraged her to seek counseling. When I called her to follow up, the phone had been disconnected. I have not seen Lydia since. I heard that Nathan had full custody, that Lydia was pregnant, then had a miscarriage, and that she had been through some difficult relationships. I've tried to get in touch with her to find out how she is doing and also what to do with the items in the garage when we stopped renting the unit, but her friend no longer worked nearby. I have had no news about Lydia in more than a year. In hindsight I believe that Lydia may have had an underlying mental health problem—such as bi-polar disorder—that was never diagnosed, but even if it had been, adequate treatment would have been unlikely given our inadequate mental health services. Her family still lives in the community and I am in the same location, so I still hope that she'll stop by one day (though not at midnight) and let me know how she is faring.

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Alicia Stevenson, whose father was tried for incest but acquitted by a jury, had moved to South Carolina to live with Charles (“Chuck”), a young man who was married to Nancy, a friend of hers. Nancy claimed she was barren and asked Alicia to be a surrogate for their child. Instead, Alicia and Chuck fell in love and moved out of state, leaving Nancy behind. After six years and two children, they married. Now, eight years later, they are still together. Thanks to e-mail and phone calls I hear from her several times a year and have visited on one occasion when I was passing near their town on a journey north. They also come to Florida every few years to visit Ruth Levy, the foster mother to whom Alicia was closest.

Chuck's mother lives in the same town and helps with the children, which has probably promoted some stability. Alicia has had many physical problems including diabetes and a hysterectomy. Their son, Charles Jr. (“Chip”), was developmentally delayed and recently diagnosed autistic. Their daughter, Kyla, is healthy and enters Kindergarten this month.

Alicia's younger brother moved to Washington State to live with his mother, but that placement did not work after some minor incidents with the police and soon he was in their social service system. I stayed in touch with him through his new foster mother who reported more arrests for misdemeanors. That state had much better programs for delinquent teens and Cory seemed to be working through them successfully. I relayed information about his sister and older brother. He remained out west until he was 19, and his foster mother thought Cory had returned to Florida. Six months later I saw a notice in our local paper that he had been arrested for stealing car parts. His address was not far from where I thought his father was living. Cory, who had never believed his sister and brother's allegations against his father, had come home.

Rich remained in another part of the state with his wife but did not stay in contact with his brother and sister. Every few years he would call me for their numbers. I did not have Cory's, but I would put him in touch with Alicia. I last heard from him a few months ago, when his father made headlines again.

One day I received a message from the Guardian ad Litem saying that someone named Emily Monaco was calling with some “important news” about Red Stevenson, Alicia's father. My curiosity

piqued, I phoned Ms. Monaco. As soon as she heard my name, she asked in a choking voice, “Do you remember me?” I admitted I didn’t. “I was Bernadette Stevenson’s best friend.”

I remembered Bernadette well. She had met Red after he had been arrested for sexually molesting his children, had been his staunch supporter during the trial, and had moved in with him after his release from jail. When Cory returned home briefly, she had been there, and had actually tried to be kind to the troubled boy. I visited often to monitor the situation, which I was certain wouldn’t last. (In fact, Cory agreed to move to Washington State after six weeks back with his father.)

“Do you remember my little girls?” Emily asked.

The last time I had been in the Stevenson home had been ten years earlier. Bernadette’s best friend had been visiting with two adorable towheads. I had walked into the living room and seen them both on Red’s lap—one on each knee—and he was tickling them. They had been about two and four years old. The sight of his hands all over their sweet arms and legs had made my flesh crawl.

As I was leaving, I asked Bernadette to follow me outside. I said, “I am not God and I will never know what happened between Mr. Stevenson and his children for sure, but I don’t believe they were lying. So please, whatever you do, don’t allow him to be alone with little girls because if something were ever to happen, you would never forgive yourself.”

Bernadette had looked at me with disdain and I had left feeling I had discharged a nasty duty, but that nothing much would change.

“Those were my little girls,” Emily Monaco said. “Angel and Amber.” She began to sob. “And you were right. Bernadette told me that you had warned her, but she didn’t want to believe you!”

Emily recounted the story in fits and starts. Bernadette had married Red Stevenson nine years earlier. After Emily’s her marriage broke up, she returned to work as a nursing home aide taking the night shift to earn more money. Sometimes Bernadette would baby-sit. Red was wonderful with the girls, but Bernadette once confided to Emily what I had said and they agreed not to allow Red to watch the girls alone as a precaution. Red took a job delivering boats for a local manufacturer and was often gone for weeks at a time making deliveries around the country. It was only when he was out of the house that Bernadette would permit the children to stay overnight, otherwise she would sleep at Bernadette’s house. When the girls were eight and ten, Bernadette and Emily warned them never to be alone with Red because he had been “in trouble” with another girl once.

Then, one night Emily was called to an emergency at the nursing home and Bernadette was at the mall with her niece. Reached by mobile phone, Bernadette said she would be home in about an hour and to drop the girls off with Red. It was only dinner time and the girls, now nine and eleven, were together, so what could go wrong?

As far as Bernadette knew, nothing had. But soon after Angel changed from a delightful, bouncing child into a slothful pre-teen. Her grades plummeted and she complained of headaches and stomachaches. She said she hated being “treated like a baby” and didn’t want Bernadette sleeping over any longer and she even refused to stay at the Stevenson home whether Red was on the road or home. Finally Emily gave into her irritable daughter’s desire for more independence and allowed them to be home alone at night while she worked. After all, her mobile phone was always on and her job was only five minutes away. Then she came home one morning to find Angel had swallowed half a bottle of aspirin and had written a suicide note.

Emily put Angel in therapy, switched to a daytime schedule, monitored homework, and tried every way she knew to find out what was happening to her once sunny, carefree daughter. Was this what teenagers were like these days? Was it due to the animosity between her and her ex-husband who had recently remarried and moved out of state? One day Amber blurted, “Angel’s in love with Red.”

All of Emily’s fears congealed and she would not let Angel out of her room until she confessed that she had been having sex with Red Stevenson since the night of the medical emergency. Red put in a video for Amber and then offered to show Angel his new jet ski on a trailer in a shed. Amber wanted to come as well, but he asked her to keep an eye on the frozen pizza to make certain it wouldn’t burn. When they were alone, Red gave the young girl a passionate kiss, then declared he was madly in love with her and “somehow they’d work out their feelings” even though everyone would try to keep them apart.” Instead of feeling threatened, Angel was smitten by this man’s attentions. He was kind, gave her gifts, and she began to enjoy his fondling. The story sickened me—this was exactly how he had groomed his daughter. Soon they were having sex in his truck while her mother worked nights, and sometimes Angel would even sneak him into the house and they would have sex in her mother’s bed while Amber slept in

the next room. Angel desired Red, but she knew it was wrong and she lived in constant fear of someone discovering the truth. Red's plans of running away with her never materialized and sometimes when she wasn't in the mood, he'd get mean and threaten to do the same to Amber. That's when she had felt cornered and swallowed the pills.

Within an hour of hearing her daughter's story, Emily phoned the police. Later that day Red Stevenson was arrested. When questioned by the police, he confessed to all of Angel's allegations, saying, "I know I am sick". He said he would plead guilty if he could get psychiatric counseling instead of prison time.

Emily wanted my help in keeping Red off the streets for the rest of his life. I didn't know what I could do since he had been acquitted and I was sworn to confidentiality. I did, however, know some of the characters who had played a part in the original case, including several other girls who had come forward to testify. Emily said the police were already looking for more children and Bernadette had given them a list of possible contacts. How many could there have been in the past ten years, especially since Red traveled all over the country? Did he know little girls at every rest stop? I contacted the detective in charge and offered assistance. He told me about the confession and his confidence that Mr. Stevenson would no longer be a problem.

I then called Alicia to tell her the news. "Finally they'll believe me," she said, more angry than pleased. "Promise you'll let me know what happens?"

Keeping my word to Alicia, I talked to Emily Monaco often. Mr. Stevenson changed his plea to "not guilty" after appearing before a judge, but this had been expected. Some other molested girls were found, but nobody's case looked strong compared to Angel's. Emily fully expected Red would accept a plea bargain that might have allowed his release in ten years. By that time he would be over 60 and her daughter would be out on her own and hopefully living in another community. Instead Red chose to roll the dice again—a probable life term or nothing.

More than a year after Red's arrest, the trial date was set. Then it was changed twice and finally Emily only called me the night before to inform me of the third time, which had not been announced in the press. I wanted to be there for Alicia in the morning, but I had to fly out of town late that afternoon. The courtroom was almost empty. Alicia's first case had received a great deal of publicity and every seat had been filled. Now there were only four or five observers—one was Bernadette. No members of the press were in attendance.

As the testimony progressed, I became more and more distressed. I felt like I was in a time warp. When Angel testified, I was struck how much she looked like Alicia. In fact, they had the same middle name, the same initials, had been the same age when intercourse began, and many of the other details were eerily familiar down to the words he uttered, the promises, even some of the same gifts. If this was his *modus operandi*, it sure was affective with young girls. The only question was: how often had he used it and nobody ever found out? After Angel testified, the detective who taped Red's confession took the stand. The jury left the room while Red's attorney—a public defender instead of the expensive private counsel Red's father-in-law had hired for the first trial—argued to disallow its use. The judge ruled that the tape should be played. In the confession Red corroborated each of Angel's accusations. "I'm sorry for what I did. I knew she was too young," Red said on the tape, admitting to several sexual encounters with Angel.

At the break I called my husband on my mobile phone and asked him to contact the press. "They need to cover this because if he gets off again, people need to know they have a possible predator around. Remind them to look up the case from 1989."

Shortly after the trial resumed, the local papers were represented. In order to make my plane, I had to leave before Mr. Stevenson testified in his own defense, as he had done in Alicia's trial. The newspaper reported that he claimed that when he had confessed to the detective, the detective made a deal to exchange counseling for a confession. The detective swore that this was not the case.

I checked in with Emily that evening. The trial was over but the jury was still out. The next day I learned the verdict: guilty of four counts of sexual battery on a child younger than 16 and two counts of lewd or lascivious conduct with a child between the ages of 12 and 16.

While waiting several months for the sentencing, I received a message from the guardian office that Rich Stevenson, Alicia's older brother, was trying to reach me. I hadn't spoken to him for five years. He was now divorced and living with a new wife a few hours away. He wanted to get in touch with his sister and brother.

“See, I’ve been in therapy and I figured it was time to make peace with my past,” he said. “I mean, maybe all the things I thought happened didn’t. So, I tried to track down my dad and the guy who answered the phone said my dad was in jail. So, I called the jail and got the name of the chaplain and found out that he did it again to some other little girl.”

I was impressed with Rich’s investigative skills. “What made you call the chaplain?”

“Well, I’ve been in jail a few times, and you can usually work out family matters best that way.”

So both brothers had served some time, I thought sadly. Then I explained that his father had indeed molested another child and probably many more. “I always believed you and Alicia.”

“And to think I was trying to put the blame on myself again,” he said. “You know, my daddy really messed with my head.”

I called Alicia and gave her Rich’s number and within the week he had driven to visit her family and she reported a happy reunion.

Both Rich and Cory attended the sentencing hearing several months later, but Bernadette did not. In her victim’s statement Angel said, “You twisted my mind to make me believe this was my problem. But it was your problem, not mine.” She spoke in a calm, strong voice. “Don’t walk out of this courtroom and think you’ve gotten the best of me,” she continued. “If anything, you made me stronger and wiser.”

Emily, who appeared much more distraught than her daughter, spoke next. She called Stevenson “most destructive and sickest man I have encountered” and spoke of choices, and the wrong one she had made when she allowed him into her family’s life. “Only you and God know the extent of all the crimes you have committed,” Emily added. “But Red Stevenson, your opportunity for choice has finally come to an end.” With shaking hands and wavering voice she urged the judge to impose the maximum penalty. “I hope you die in prison, alone,” she finished, then and turned her back on him.

The judge did not know about the previous case, but she had heard enough. She slapped Alicia’s father with the maximum sentence for each of the charges: six concurrent life terms, decreeing, “Richard Stevenson, it is the desire of this court that you are never again released into society for the remainder of your natural life.”

Red remained impassive, his arms folded across his chest, but Emily hugged her two daughters and gasped, “Red Stevenson, they’ve got you now.”

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Of all my guardian children, I’ve stayed closest to the Colby sisters *Simone, Nicole, and Julie*. The Slaters did adopt them and I attended the ceremony in the judge’s chambers as well as hosted a party for their family and friends. (Curiously, I picked “Slater” as a pseudonym when I started writing the book, without knowing that this name would become infamous in our county when a teen father named Slater allegedly abused one of his twin infants so severely that she died and the case continues to be in the headlines¹.) This happy event took place around the time of the publication of the first edition of *I Speak for This Child: True Stories of a Child Advocate* and the Slaters were invited to help promote the role of court-appointed special advocates. Their whole family and I went to New York for an appearance on Good Morning America complete with limousine ride and shopping spree at Macy’s. But love and discipline do not cure everything and the family struggled for many years. Raising three teen daughters had joyous moments, but each were haunted by ghosts from their abusive past.

Simone was determined that her background would not affect her future. She buried herself in her schoolwork and although she had never been a brilliant student, her tenacity paid off. She applied to a college connected with the Colby’s church and was accepted with a scholarship. Because her adoption was not final until late in her senior year of high school, everyone believed her financial assistance application would be treated like an emancipated minor rather than as one of the Colby children. Only three weeks before she was due to matriculate, Simone was almost three thousand dollars short. She called me with the news and asked if I would write a letter to the school explaining her legal situation. I agreed and volunteered to contact the financial aid office. However, there was nothing they could do. “If she maintains a “B” average the first year, she’ll qualify for a full ride the next three years with our work/study program, but we’ve given the maximum for this year.”

I called Simone back to report my failure. “Don’t worry, I’ll pray about it and something will happen,” she said.

¹ Other than the names of my family members and this reference, all other names and exact locations have been changed.

“Okay, you pray, but I’ll work on it. Together maybe we’ll come up with a miracle.” (In 1998, Florida began a new state scholarship program so that children in foster care or those adopted from foster care now can attend any state school of higher learning with tuition waivers.)

An hour later, a prominent member of the church, who wished to remain anonymous, pledged half the amount due. Next I contacted a friend who is a big fund-raiser in a nearby metropolitan area. “Do you know any scholarship organization that can write a check for fifteen hundred dollars in a week?” I asked, then explained Simone’s predicament.

“I can!” she said. “College scholarships are exactly what my latest charity is all about and I can write a check for under two thousand without board approval. If you say the kid is worthy, that’s good enough for me.”

Sputtering, I called Simone back. “You have the money.”

“What do you mean?” she asked since less than two hours had passed since her initial phone call.

I explained that the balance would be in her bank account in a few days. She entered college on time and graduated with honors. She was the first of my guardian children to not only graduate high school, but college. She received a scholarship the last three years, majored in sociology, and is thinking about doing some missionary work. Whenever I see her, she is excruciatingly thin and her sisters relay that she has battled some eating disorders. Once she was launched in college, I saw her infrequently, but we stay in touch through Julie.

Nicole, who had been the most seriously abused sister, had the most turbulent adolescence. Every once in a while an uncontrollable rage would well up and she wouldn’t know how to handle it. Her adoptive mother, Jeanne Slater, would open her Bible and try to find a comforting passage, but this infuriated Nicole further. Sometimes she’d shout, “I’m going to call Gay!”

“Then call her!” Jeanne would say and lock herself in her room.

“I’m losing it,” Nicole would announce.

“Be right there,” I’d respond. Fortunately she lived less than ten minutes from either my office or home. I’d pull into the driveway and she’d get into the front seat and punch the preset button for her favorite radio station. We wouldn’t go anywhere, just sit in the car. I didn’t want to reward her out-of-control behavior with anything more than a comforting hug and willing ear. I used active listening techniques while she vented.

“I just wanted to smash her face!” she’d say referring to one of her sisters, her adoptive mother, a teacher, or whoever stood in her way at that moment.

“You’re angry because you couldn’t do what you wanted,” I reflected.

“Yes, it’s always their way or the highway.”

“You’d like to be more independent,” I stated.

“The minute I am eighteen I’m out of there!”

On and on she would rail until the steam subsided and she was ready to go back inside. Then I’d drive off feeling spent myself.

As part of the adoption, the state had agreed to cover private psychological care with the therapist the children had been seeing and liked. But shortly after the adoption was finalized, the Slaters felt a counselor connected with their church was more appropriate. The sisters told me they didn’t trust the new counselor because they felt she would report their conversations to the Slaters and the Slaters wouldn’t allow them to see their old doctor. As soon as the adoption was final, I had been officially discharged from the case, so I not only was not permitted to interfere, I knew my opinion was not wanted. I decided to remain on the sidelines as a friend who the girls could trust in times of extreme need.

This adoption had been an open one and the children were free to visit with their mother, Lottie Hunt, and their father, Buddy Colby, as well as their grandparents and other relatives in the community. They avoided visits to their father because he was often drunk and unpredictable, and only saw him when other family members were around, but they were able to keep a friendly relationship with their mother. Lottie had long-standing mental health issues that made her unstable, but she loved her daughters and cooperated with Jeanne and Vic Slater. Lottie would help out by taking a child to a dental appointment, attend school assemblies, and visited often. When Simone graduated high school and suddenly rebelled against the Slater’s curfews, she moved back in with her mother. Though hurt, Jeanne said, “The porch light is always on, honey. Come home whenever you want.”

After two weeks, Simone remembered why her mother had been unable to be a good parent, and moved back into her old room until it was time to leave for college.

One of the arguments against terminating parental rights that I heard from officials at the Department for Children and Families (formerly HRS), was that “if a parent won the lottery the children would lose the right to inherit.” I found this position ludicrous compared to the damage to children left to languish in the limbo of the foster care system. Also it didn’t make sense. Even if a parent did have her rights terminated, there was nothing stopping her from leaving a windfall to a biological child regardless of the legal severance unless she got into a car accident on the way to claiming the winnings.

I’d repeated this reasoning many times when my theory was ironically tested. Lottie Hunt was hurt in an accident and filed a lawsuit against the trucking company that hit her. A year after her children had been adopted by the Slaters she received a large settlement. What did she do with the first proceeds? She put ten thousand dollars away for each of her daughters. When each they turned sixteen, Lottie bought them a used car, paid the insurance, and kept the rest in a nest egg for their futures.

Nicole was a natural student and she breezed through high school while working part-time for an outpatient surgical center. They were so impressed with her clinical abilities that they offered her a scholarship to study nursing. Nicole turned eighteen in February of her senior year and on that date she moved out, but instead of moving in with her biological mother, she set up housekeeping with Pedro, the coach of the local soccer team. She did not want to go to Simone’s Christian college but start to get her basic credits for a nursing degree at the local community college. Her grades had won her a partial state scholarship and if she continued with her job she would qualify for a medical scholarship at the end of a year. She still needed about a thousand dollars for fees and books, but the same anonymous source who had helped Simone succeed was standing by with funds for her sister.

The Slaters were horrified that Nicole was living in sin and forbid any contact with the impressionable Julie. While sweet and tractable for the first few years, Julie became more and more sullen as puberty set in, and often sarcastic after Simone left home. She now was the middle child between volatile Nicole and the rambunctious twin grandsons they were raising. She wasn’t as gifted a student as Nicole nor as willowy as Simone and she was certain Jeanne favored her flesh and blood. Although she enjoyed having a room to herself when Nicole moved out, she resented being stuck with all the chores that the three girls had once shared.

In those days I did not understand as much about attachment and adoption as I do now. (See below for my family’s voyage into these waters.) In retrospect I see that all my guardian children have suffered from various degrees of attachment disorder which comes not only from frequent moves in the foster care, but neglect the first years of life. Each of the Colby sisters manifested symptoms differently and the Slaters were ill-equipped and uninformed about the specific remedies which would have helped them cope and the girls to heal.

Their response to Julie’s symptoms, which included frequent lying and cheating, led to her being grounded most of the time. Julie rebelled by sneaking out whenever she could. One day she called me collect in a panic. She had cut school with several friends and driven to Orlando to attend a theme park. They had calculated it so they would be back at the same time as the school bus, but as they were turning to get gas, they were rear-ended by a dazed German tourist who didn’t speak English. They had called another friend to come and get them, but Julie now ached all over and thought she might have broken her wrist. I told her she would have to tell the Slaters and she panicked. “What’s wrong with the truth?” I insisted. “Anything else is just going to turn into a tangled web of deceit.”

Julie sobbed, “I can’t! I just can’t.”

I then mentioned a doctor who went to their church and who had treated the family. “Stop by his office and ask him to check you. I’ll call and tell him about the situation, and then what happens between doctor and patient is none of my business. But I won’t lie for you to anyone, not even Jeanne.”

Fortunately, her wrist was not broken and because of the damaged car, the Slaters soon heard the whole sorry story, but with a twist. Somehow I was blamed for knowing about the trip and telling the girls it was all right to go.

I called Jeanne and had a heart-to-heart. Since I had known the girls long before she had, and also had their trust on many confidential matters, she resented me. I knew it was a combination of jealousy and insecurity, as well as distrust because I was not Christian. “Jeanne,” I said, “you are the girls’ mother and I am their friend. They need you to parent them, but they need me in a different way. I know some of their darkest secrets, secrets you said you didn’t want to know. We’ve been through a lot together and they trust me. Isn’t it better for them to have someone like me to go to than nobody—or worse some stranger with an ulterior motive? I always steer them back to you or the church, but if they’ve ever needed me, I’ve been

there.” Jeanne conceded and we left it a truce. I promised I would always tell her if I felt one of the girls was in serious danger, otherwise I would keep their confidences.

I stayed in close touch with Nicole during her first term at the community college. She mentioned that her work schedule was making it hard to take a full complement of freshman classes and she had dropped out of one. One evening when I called to invite her to lunch, she was not home, so I phoned the next morning hoping to catch her before she left for class. I woke her and she said that class was later in the day. I thought she had arranged all her classes before noon then worked at the surgery center until seven. My guardian antennae stiffened. I called the school’s registrar and asked if Nicole Colby Slater was enrolled and learned that she had dropped out after the first week. Knowing she was probably still home in bed, I drove to her apartment and banged loudly on the door.

Pedro answered and let me in, then Nicole stumbled into the room and sat on a sofa I had lent her. She looked different. Her hair was bleached blonde, her eyebrows had been shaved, and she smelled of tobacco. I noticed some marijuana roaches in an ashtray along with a mountain of cigarette butts. Nicole was angry at being awakened and even more incensed when she learned I had checked up on her.

“What about the scholarship from the church patron?” I asked. “Did you get your money back from the school?”

“No,” she admitted. “But I only lost the three hundred dollar deposit.”

“Can it be applied next semester?”

“No.”

“What about the seven hundred dollar balance?”

“I spent it,” she said in a challenging voice.

“On what?”

“Clothes for my new job,” she admitted.

“You’re not working at the surgery center?”

“Not after next week. I’m tired of killing myself for six dollars an hour when I can make more than a week’s salary in a night.”

“Doing what?” I asked, but I already suspected because I’d known several former foster children who had become lap dancers.

I tried to talk to her about what had happened to these other girls: the drug addiction, slide into prostitution, arrests, and being victimized by club owners and personal managers. “I’m smart, I’ll avoid all that. I’m going to save the money and buy myself some freedom.”

I started to launch into a lecture about education buying freedom, but looking into her glazed eyes I didn’t want to waste either my breath or ruin whatever was left of our relationship. Still I was in a bad position since I had brokered the scholarship. “If you are earning good money dancing, then you’ll be able to pay back the donor,” I said. “I’ll expect you to do so and I’ll be talking to your pastor about a payment schedule.”

She was aghast. “Don’t tell him what I am doing!”

“I won’t, but how long can you keep your job secret in this small town?” I stood up to leave. “Call me if you need me,” I said, still meaning it. I forced myself to hug her and then went out to my car. This time I was the one who lost it.

Knowing that I disapproved of her lifestyle, Nicole only called or visited occasionally over the next few years. She called when she was arrested for prostitution, although she claimed it was harassment and that she had never had sex with any of her clients. She called me when her boyfriend beat her up. Pedro was long gone and had been replaced by Stew, a middle-aged man married to a woman in another state who owned the club where she danced. I talked to her about going to a women’s shelter and seeking help for abused women, but she didn’t go. She called me when she was released from the hospital after a bad reaction to crack cocaine. Her heart had “gone wild” and “I thought I was going to die”. I talked to her about drug rehab and getting away from Stew once and for all, but she did nothing. She called me when Stew was arrested for selling drugs and she had used all her saving to bail him out. I asked her how much she had saved and she told me that she gave Stew all her money anyway and had nothing. She hadn’t even paid back her scholarship money. One rainy day she came by the house with Julie. Nicole was wearing slinky pants made from a slippery fabric and appeared twenty pounds underweight. Her eyes were sunken and there were bruises on her arms. Julie asked me to talk some sense into her, but I was talked out. I could not hide my profound disappointment. I knew that Julie had just been suspended from

school. “You have two sisters as role models. Pick which one you want to emulate,” I said in a tense voice.

The next call from Nicole was to announce her pregnancy. “What are you planning to do?”

“I’m Christian so there is no other choice.”

“Who was the father?” I asked.

“Well, Stew thinks he is, but it is really a guy from New York. I figure I can get both to support it.”

“Have you heard about DNA testing?” I asked.

Nicole skipped the question and bubbled on about moving back home with Lottie, who was going to help with the baby. Sure, I thought, Lottie who couldn’t even feed Julie a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, but held my tongue and just hoped that Nicole wouldn’t take drugs during the pregnancy or get killed by either of the two men.

Nicole gave birth to Delilah this summer and now lives with the Slaters who are proud and devoted grandparents. Lottie helps out as well. Nicole is back in school studying to be a laboratory technician and is receiving some child support from Stew. Friends who see the baby in church say she is gorgeous.

Julie spent a year being home schooled to catch up, but when she turned eighteen she still had two more years of high school to complete. Just like her sisters, she was unwilling to follow the Slaters’ strict house rules and moved in with a friend. Julie had various cashier jobs since she was sixteen and added hours so she worked more than 50 hours a week while still attending classes in the morning. This left little time for sleep, meals, or homework, but she managed to pay her part of the rent on the trailer and keep her unreliable car in gas and insurance. When her car broke down, Lottie’s husband, a mechanic, would fix it for her, but when the parts finally exceeded its value, she had to rely on her friends to drive her everywhere. No matter how hard she tried, Julie couldn’t make it on her own, nor should she have been expected to. She came to me for help. Julie wanted to finish school and she didn’t want to live with either the Slaters or her mother. I sensed she was asking me to take her in, but after my experience with Lydia, and the recent addition to our household, I knew it would never work. I promised to help and started making phone calls.

I called the church, talked to church members who had a spare room, and asked folks around the guardian program office. On one hand Julie was a good kid who tried hard, but I knew she was also a rebellious teen who didn’t want to follow rules, who had little money to contribute to a household, and who needed adult encouragement to finish school. After hanging up from one discouraging conversation, my housekeeper, Martha, came into the room. She’s been with me for more than ten years and had met Julie and her sisters on several occasions. She’d even helped with their adoption party. “Who needs a home?” she asked. Without going into details, I told her.

“After my mother died, we’ve always made her room available to people in need. We took care of one elderly man after his surgery, and I’ve been praying for the Lord to send us the right person. Maybe it’s Julie.”

I tried to think of some reason to dissuade her, but couldn’t, so I called Julie and put Martha on the phone. They arranged to meet at her house and the next weekend Julie moved in. Julie lived with Martha and her husband for more than a year. I can’t say Julie was the model house guest—she stayed out all night, had worrisome friends stop by at late hours, and was not always truthful. But Martha, an experienced mother with grown children, treated her like a young adult. When Julie’s car broke down, Martha got her to and from school and her jobs. Julie did graduate high school and then moved in with a youth counselor from her church for another year. Still unsure of what she wants, she joined a year-long program that transitions youth between high school and college and also prepares them for missionary work. She’s now living in Arizona on her own for the first time and excited about the challenges of the school.

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Sharonda is an African-American young woman who was told by her case worker to get pregnant if she wanted economic services—and followed her advice. She gave birth to her first son, Za’quelle, before her seventeenth birthday. With support from her extended family, she was able to care for him fairly well for the first few months although Za’quelle’s father went to prison for attempted murder. Six months later Sharonda was pregnant by another man, and when she refused to have an abortion, he broke up with her. Sometimes I think Sharonda is the unluckiest person I’ve ever met. Her mother was killed in

front of her when she was a young child, her father's been in prison most of her life, and she was "raised" by a blind elderly great-grandmother who needed the child as her eyes and did little to care for her. Even though Sharonda had been placed in the "foster care system" since the age of ten, she had never spent more than a few weeks in a foster home. Instead she had been allowed to "scrounge" (the caseworker's term) between the homes of relatives in a crime-ridden neighborhood of welfare mothers and cocaine dealers. Although very bright, she often missed school and never completed high school.

One day, while standing on a street corner, the new girlfriend of her expected baby's father drove past and shouted, "He's mine now!"

Furious, Sharonda tossed a beer bottle at the car. The bottle bounced off the side view mirror, into the open window, and split the girl's forehead leaving a large, bloody gash. She called the police and a few minutes later Sharonda was arrested kicking and screaming. The next day I visited a pregnant Sharonda in jail and a few weeks later she was convicted for assault with a deadly weapon and resisting an officer with violence. She was transferred from the county jail to the state women's prison. I had to help find Za'quelle a home. A second cousin by marriage was the best placement, but she did not qualify for most subsidies. Eventually she agreed to take him anyway and the baby flourished.

I offered to meet Sharonda at the hospital when she went into labor with her second child. However the prison matron failed to call me until after the baby was born. I arrived when Sharonda's second son, Benny, was a few hours old. Sharonda had one arm shackled to the bed rail, making it difficult for her to hold him during the short 24 hours she could be with him. I stayed with her when she was wheeled away screaming and crying for her baby and Benny was turned over to his father's mother.

While she was in prison, Sharonda turned eighteen and I made my last appearance on her behalf. I had been her Guardian ad Litem for almost four years and nothing I had ever tried for her had made a difference. I felt like an utter failure. In my court report I wrote:

"In many cases the adults responsible for Sharonda's care (relatives, caregivers, department staff, and this Guardian ad Litem) have been either helpless, confused, or irresponsible in not taking a more aggressive role in finding Sharonda a secure, suitable place for her to overcome her considerable deficits, receive rehabilitation, education, structure, and to meet more positive role models.

Since none of my recommendations have been followed, it is doubtful, considering the circumstances, that anything I say regarding this young woman will change her sad outcome. Cynthia Smiley, the head of the county social service office, once stated that she has known Sharonda and her family since she was a small child and there was every indication from early on that she was headed in exactly the direction she took: school failure and drop-out, criminal activities, teenage motherhood, dependency on the welfare system, with the end result ending on the doorstep of the criminal justice department.

If we can predict these outcomes, why can't we try to circumvent them? From what I have learned on this case, I have to suspect some racist elements in the manner in which Sharonda has been offered and received services. The fact that there were no "culturally appropriate" foster homes does not mean there should not have been or that one should not have been created for Sharonda and those who follow her. Just because there was not a local program for Sharonda, does not mean she should not have been sent somewhere else in the state, even against her wishes, when she was young enough to benefit.

I have come to care deeply for Sharonda, even though she has been "difficult" and has not always agreed with or been happy with me. But I have to be realistic in that there is little I can do, other than let her know there are people who still care.

So my recommendations are to all of us who have worked with and for Sharonda, including the Guardian ad Litem staff, and Guardian ad Litem, foster care staff, social service program office, and the judge that:

- 1) Every child, no matter age or race, deserves a safe, permanent, and caring home.
- 2) Children adjudicated in need of services have the RIGHT to receive these services, not just to be told to get them and participate in them.
- 3) Every child in need of services should have those services planned by professionals and carried out and evaluated.

4) Children adjudicated into foster care belong in licensed foster homes whenever possible or with responsible adults trained and proven able to give daily emotional, intellectual, as well as physical support. Or, these children belong in group homes that offer additional services as required.

5) We must find ways to intervene positively in cases like Sharonda's as early as possible.

6) We cannot expect children to do various tasks without daily support from their caregivers. These tasks include going to school, having socially acceptable behavior, responsible sexual behavior, attending counseling and other self-improvement or mental health programs.

7) Children like Sharonda who show early signs of criminal behavior or rebellion are merely demonstrating their needs are more intense and should be given early, preventative (even expensive care) as soon as possible.

8) Young women in need of services need continued medical care, counseling, and help to make responsible sexual decisions and to deal with sexual pressures.

9) Everyone reading this document must re-examine how to prevent other young women from going down this same unhappy road.

10) Sharonda should realize that is never too late to make significant changes in her life so that she can be happy, productive, healthy, and help her children to have a better life.

When I went to court for my last appearance on Sharonda's behalf, I was not sure how the judge would feel about my diatribe. Although he had read the report beforehand, he read my list aloud. Then, with Sharonda on the court speaker phone, said, "I have been your judge for three years and I am here to apologize to you. I've tried to order various services for you, but my orders have never been carried out. I don't know what else I could have done, but obviously I have failed you or you would not be where you are. We have all failed you. You came to us a young child in need and we did not meet your needs. You have reason to be angry, but you still can get your life together. When you come out, my door is open to you, and I'll help you if I can." Then he recessed the court for fifteen minutes because he was overcome with feelings of sadness.

A few months later Benny's father was also imprisoned for a violent crime and now, six years later, his grandmother is still raising him. During his infancy, Sharonda was released to a halfway house and was anxious to see her sons. Nobody in her family was able to drive them the hour and a half to the center, but one day I picked up both children and the cousin who took care of Za'quelle and we made the trek. Sharonda was doing well with her work-release job at a fast food restaurant. Most of her salary went into a savings account and she showed me her calculations. By the time she was released, she would have almost \$1500—enough to get a decent apartment and reunite the family. Plus she would have a work record and a reference.

A few weeks later, on a blazing hot August afternoon in Florida, Sharonda became dizzy working at a deep fat fryer. Her employer told her to take a break, but she was so weak she could hardly lift her head from the table. The manager didn't want her passing out in the restaurant and called the halfway house to come and get her. They refused to send a car until her shift was over and told her to walk back—a little more than a mile along a six-lane major boulevard. After a few blocks, Sharonda fell to the side of the road. A passing motorist called 911 and an ambulance was dispatched. The nearest hospital was less than six blocks away. In the emergency room she was treated with IV fluids and given aspirin to bring down her fever of 103°. She had the flu. But the bill for the ambulance and hospital came to \$1800 and Sharonda was expected to pay it from her savings. Sharonda became enraged. On her next day back at the job she lashed out against the manager for not offering her a ride that would have taken less than five minutes. She lost the job and any hope of a reference. Next she became unruly at the halfway house because they had refused to come for her and they threatened to send her back to the state prison and take away her gain time. When I heard the story, I called the head of the halfway house. I had met the warden when I had brought the children to visit, and she was receptive to my concerns. Eventually she negotiated the hospital bill so Sharonda was released on schedule with a few hundred dollars left in her account.

Still, after a year in prison, Sharonda had not been able to finish her GED or make much progress with how to conduct her life. She was reunited with Za'quelle and lived only a few blocks from Benny.

With the help of a young cousin who was also a single mother, they shared an apartment and co-parented their children, but Sharonda did not take any steps to complete her education or find a job. Although the welfare rules changed, she did not take advantages of any new programs to better her position. She'd call me collect when she needed something and I would always try to help, although I would never give her money.

Another year passed and Sharonda was pregnant with her third child. Somehow she had missed her quarterly birth control shot by a few days. This time when she called me in labor, I was home and made it to the hospital. I held her hand, helped her push, and cut the cord. She didn't have a little girl's name and asked for my help. We decided on Ra'quelle (her spelling) to rhyme with her older brother's name. As I rocked the newborn, I was overcome with an urge to bring her home and raise her with every advantage. Why shouldn't this child have nutritious, regular meals, a stimulating pre-school, books, educational toys, trips, adventures, even a college education? Would she need an entirely different environment to escape Sharonda's predictable path?

I didn't take Ra'quelle home, but I visited often the first six months. They say that there are certain species-specific behaviors related to attachment and bonding that begin at birth and that the relatives and friends attending a birth feel a special attachment to the infant. This is an added protection for if the mother dies, there is an aunt or neighbor who will be concerned with that child's survival. Maybe that is what spurred me to check on this baby even more frequently than Benny and Za'quelle. Soon Sharonda became more distant, moved more often, and she rarely had a phone. She lived 30 miles away and I rarely was in her town. Then one day I had the call I had feared most. Ra'quelle had been removed by child protective services. Sharonda had abused her daughter. The two-year-old now had her own Guardian ad Litem and since I was no longer a party to the case—and also considered an advocate for the mother—I was out of the loop. I offered any information I could on the family, but was only told enough to understand that Ra'quelle had many “bizarre marks” on her fragile body and her behavior indicated emotional delays. Sharonda had all sorts of excuses and explanations, but I didn't buy them, and she knew it.

Sharonda had never been parented adequately as a child thus she could not nurture another life. Just like Lydia, who had vowed not to treat her child the way she had been treated, Sharonda was locked into the abusive cycle. A few months after her daughter was removed from her custody, I had a series of collect calls from Sharonda in yet another jail. The charges was assault with a vehicle! She had tried to run someone over, although she had a thousand excuses why this was not the case. She also admitted that she was expecting her fourth child—and second daughter—in a few months.

The last I heard Sharonda was days from her due date. She claimed all charges were dropped and she was out of jail. Za'quelle, now seven, is living with the cousin who took him as an infant and says he doesn't want to return to his mother. Since their apartment is only blocks apart down the street from Sharonda's, he sees his mother almost daily. Benny has never left his paternal grandmother's house, and although his father is serving a life sentence, probably has had the most stable life so far. Ra'quelle was placed by the department with Sharonda's grandmother, so yet another generation is being raised by a great-grandmother. Sharonda thinks she will be able to keep the new baby after she is born. She has not asked me to be present during the delivery.

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Five years ago, after both our sons were in college, my husband, Philip, and I stared at each other across the dinner table and admitted that we had an acute case of empty nest syndrome. Grandchildren were on the far horizon and a baby was out of the question. We talked about the many children I'd helped find adoptive homes as a guardian—the Colby sisters were the beginning of a trend in my cases—and knew there were many other young people with whom we could share our home and heart. However we didn't act on our interest until we were shocked into changing our life.

The day was dazzling. We were flying in our small private plane to our older son's graduation from Princeton. Our younger son, Josh, was in the back and Philip was at the controls. After an uneventful trip, we had just soared over the glinting waters of Delaware Bay and were heading for a landing in Trenton, New Jersey. Below were the pine barrens. Suddenly there was a loud cracking sound. The engine stopped. We had two minutes and two miles to make a landing. No airports were in sight. Josh, who also had his pilot's license, helped his father decide on the only available field. We headed for it, plowed through a fence, had our right wing ripped apart by a railroad tie post, spun around into another field and stopped. We opened the doors, rushed out into the field and hugged each other. Rescue personnel

descended on the scene and seeing the mangled plane asked where the victims were. The three of us were unharmed. Philip turned to me and said, "I guess there is something else for us to do on this planet."

Two weeks later we enrolled in the foster and adoptive parent training course, went through the home study, had our background checked thoroughly. Then we started looking for children and made sure others knew we were available. The process was more arduous than we expected, partially because both of us were child advocates and the caseworkers were suspicious because we might work too hard to get a child that he or she needed. After more than a year since our decision had passed, a friend pointed out a child in a book of waiting children in a nearby county. We called the 800 number to inquire saying "We're a home studied family and are interested in Ashley." Nobody called back. After two more unanswered calls, I became annoyed and tracked Ashley to the residential treatment center where she lived. Their adoption worker was more receptive and began her own home study. I also contacted Ashley's Guardian ad Litem and we met for lunch. Mary Miller had met Ashley, and her brother, when they were living in a foster home where she was visiting another case. The foster mother had wondered why the two children, who had been in the system for more than five years, had no representation. Mary took the case which led to an appalling trail of mismanagement and abuse on the part of the system. Another two years passed before Mary could get the parental rights terminated and the children free for adoption. She also helped get them placed together in a center that could offer therapy to help them recover from more than a dozen moves in a few short years, including a stay in a brutally abusive foster home. She also championed our adoption of Ashley as well as a different placement for her brother who had very different needs. (The siblings are in constant contact and visit often.)

Being a guardian is a lot different from being an adoptive parent, especially to a child from a very disrupted background. Phil and I have enjoyed this very different journey as we parent our third child and first daughter. Ashley came to us shortly before her twelfth birthday and her adoption was final eight months later. She is almost sixteen, a top student, and also a national spokesperson for the Guardian ad Litem program because she credits Mary Miller for getting her out of the system. I could go on and on about her accomplishments because, as I like to say, you get to brag more when you adopt!

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If you have ever wanted to help, there are many volunteer opportunities from mentoring to Big Brothers, Big Sisters, local Boys and Girls Clubs, Ys, and of course, court-appointed special advocates. For more information on your local CASA organization please contact: www.nationalcasa.org.