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Learning to Leave Positive Marks and Recognize Bad Ones By Frank P. Cervone

I opened my email at 5 a.m. Saturday - our two dogs forgot we sleep in on the weekend - to find a request for assistance from a longtime Support Center for Child Advocates volunteer attorney, about child siblings of his now-adult client. The younger children were living with a family friend after the death of their mother two years back. Now, the 7-year-old was found to have bruises on her eye and body, and had missed school for two weeks. Someone had left marks on her.

Unexplained bruises on a young child are often a prima facie sign of child abuse. A hospital visit and perhaps protective services investigations will follow. The family may return to the child welfare system, with all of its positive influences and negative effects. That experience will leave marks too.

The case got me thinking about all the physical and emotional scars that child abuse leaves on children, and the healing and growth that needs to happen. What marks do we mean to leave in the lives of children? What do the marks tell us?

Last fall, I got involved in the death-penalty appeal of Terry Williams, who committed two murders, when he was ages 17 and 18, of two older men who allegedly raped him. The nationally recognized expert in child sexual abuse who examined him concluded that the youth's years of abuse and trauma were directly related to the crimes for which he is now incarcerated. Men who allegedly preyed on the boy included his public schoolteacher, a minister who used his position in his church to "groom" young boys, another who reached boys through being a sports booster and others. Williams' shame and confusion were so intense that he began cutting himself and engaging in other acts of mutilation as a teenager.

Like too many other victims, no one stepped up for Williams. The boy received no counseling or support to help him deal with the repeated traumas he endured; in fact, many of the people who were supposed to help Williams preyed on him. No one saw, or wanted to see, the marks they and others were leaving.

In recent years, Pennsylvanians have been horrified to learn that so many young people have been victimized yet failed to disclose the abuse. The Williams case is now before the Pennsylvania Supreme Court. It stands along with so many others in the current historical picture of our work, as a path to understanding the important role of past trauma in present and future actions and health of victims (i.e., the "trauma-focused" approach). This narrative framework is at the heart of the key question in all the recent cases: Should we believe him?



If the answer is yes, then the entire history of the Williams prosecution and sentencing must be reframed. The Jerry Sandusky case and Philadelphia clergy cases taught us this much: Once believed, a victim of sexual abuse is entitled to understanding about the trauma and the delays and other problems the abuse may have caused.

Not all the marks are bad ones. The volunteer attorney, who phoned me about the 7-year-old, first represented children in this family as a Child Advocates pro bono lawyer in 1990, and has been involved with the family in a supportive way ever since. His dedication and care helped to guide the older sister through high school and college, and she is a young corporate executive today who is doing what she can to look after her younger siblings.

The Israeli educator Chaim Peri observed that we must "counter the sense of abandonment" that troubled youth experience, with stability and presence. "In incoherent and chaotic lives, everything the youth meets must speak to them of reformation, towards coherence in and about their lives."

Here at Child Advocates we see hundreds of examples each year of the valued impact that our volunteer attorneys have on the lives of children and youth. Our clients are referred to us just when they are in the lowest place in their lives — beaten, abandoned, removed from the only homes they know. The marks are physical and emotional. Yet, through the devoted work of volunteer attorneys and staff social workers, we battle for their right to a safe and secure home, and we fight to ensure that each child's medical, educational and emotional needs are met. Sometimes it is one's presence in a school meeting, or pressing for another chance when failure or exclusion threatens. In both word and deed, we embody coherence in the face of their chaos. This is how we start the healing process.

What if someone had stepped up for Williams, the way our volunteer attorney did for his clients 20-plus years ago, or the way he again worked to help keep young ones safe over the recent weekend? Certainly the abuse would have stopped. Perhaps the secrets and shame might have been turned into some more salutary energy.

It is possible to leave a mark of good will, and essential when a child needs to heal.

We can make a difference in the lives of children through pro bono child advocacy service. Together we can change the story. •

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