

April 2, 2006

Suffer The Children

They are the children of the welfare system, many of whom grow up loveless, their childhood innocence slowly gnarled by loneliness. The things they covet the most are the tender strokes of a mother's touch, family gatherings and someone to tell them they're not dispensable.

By [VIVIAN SONG](#)

They're the forgotten children. They're forsaken by the public and the media until headline stories like Jeffrey Baldwin -- who at 5 years old died weighing only 21 pounds -- and Paul Blackwell, a foster parent who admitted to sexually abusing two foster children, spark a firestorm of outrage and incense parents with little ones.

"I spent five years without being hugged," says Emily, 18, in a heartbreaking documentary *Wards of the Crown*.

"There was nothing anyone could do," she says, her blue eyes wide and serious, her expression stoic. "Just sit in your closet, bang your head and maybe someone will hear that you're scared."



There's also Leaha, 16, who opens the film, sitting in a women's shelter on Christmas Eve. The one thing she wants more than anything for the holidays is her mom.

"Most of all, I'd love to have my mom under the Christmas tree with a big bow tie on her," she says in a strong, husky voice that belies a fragile vulnerability.

Filmmaker Andree Cazabon followed the teens in care for 10 months, pulling the veil off a topic silenced by indifference.

"The ultimate question is, do we want to have children grow up in the child-care system? Is the Children's Aid Society an adequate parent?" Cazabon asks.

"Hopefully, this will be a turning point in Canadian history with the Baldwin case. It's important for Canadians to stop and refuel and say, 'What does this name have to do with me?' "

On April 6, when a judge hands down his verdict to Baldwin's grandparents who stand accused of starving their grandson to death, society will undergo its big test.

Deputy Chief Coroner Dr. Jim Cairns presides over the deaths of about 70 children a year involved with the CAS. He can rhyme off names of dead children he's had to investigate and the year they died: Shanay Johnson, 1993, Kasandra Hislop, 1991, Devon Jamie-Lee Burns, 1996.

"It's frightening," he says of this ability. "The ones that leave a lasting impression on you, a

large percentage of them will be child deaths."

The mandate of the downtown coroner's office on Grenville St. is emblazoned on the wall in the reception area: "We speak for the dead to protect the living."

Cairns' office is sparsely decorated, with the exception of a few pictures: A watercolour of Noah's Ark painted by a child, a poster of Lance Armstrong, and a court sketch of Cairns and Renee Heikamp, a mother who was charged with criminal negligence for starving her baby, Jordan, to death. Jordan was found in a women's shelter at five weeks old weighing less than 4 pounds.

In 1997, Cairns -- part of a child mortality task force -- released a preliminary report based on a series of coroner's inquests that investigated the alarming number of children's deaths in the child welfare system. About 100 children died between 1994 and 1995, prompting inquest calls for a "children-first" approach, as well as a standardized case management and risk assessment system.

Putting children first became the priority, he says: "Before that legislation, there was an overemphasis on keeping families together at all costs."

The province also passed legislation that would fine doctors, teachers and even neighbours who fail to report a child if they suspect the child is being abused. Reporting went up by 50%.

But what happens once these children are taken away from their families and placed into the child welfare system?

Between April 1, 2004, and March 31, 2005, the 53 Children's Aid Societies in Ontario provided substitute care to 30,423 children.

They responded to 44,375 inquiries under investigation and protection services and completed 82,137 investigations, including dozens of child deaths and hundreds of allegations of abuse and mistreatment.

In documents obtained from the ministry of children and youth services under the Freedom of Information Act, the CAS of Toronto -- which works with 33,351 children -- reported the deaths of 12 clients and received 176 allegations of abuse in 2004.

One boy died of strangulation after he was found hanging in his closet. Another died when he fell from his balcony, and a girl died from a skull fracture and brain injury. Her mother faces charges.

Meanwhile, the number of cases alleging abuse increased from 147 in 2003 to 176 in 2004. Of these, 68 were allegations of mistreatment, including inappropriate discipline of children by foster parents or residential staff.

But perhaps more than any other CAS, the Catholic CAS made the most repeat appearances in the media.

In addition to the Baldwin case, the agency is feeling the heat for placing children in the care of Paul Blackwell, a foster parent who last month admitted to sexually abusing two Crown wards.

Between 2000 and 2004, the number of serious occurrences reported within the CCAS almost doubled, from 220 to 406. The agency serves 18,588 children.

In 2004, the CCAS reported the deaths of nine clients while under their care and 39 allegations of abuse.

A few of the deaths were anticipated because of existing medical conditions but one instance was a mother-and-son murder suicide.

For Cairns, who boasts a prolific career with 31 years of experience working with the dead, the unidentified children who make up these statistics in the report all have faces and names.

"All of us are hardened, and you have to be, but when (a child dies), that's when the shell of armour breaks down."