

**Observations in San Angelo at the FLDS Shelter  
April 2008**

I arrived at the Pavillion on my first night and was startled by my feelings of admiration for the women and protectiveness for the children. By the second day, I was ready to run in front of the CNN cameras to shout that there was a travesty happening inside those walls. I could not fathom the thought of removing the children from their mothers. Of course I was cautioned not to interfere in a "crime scene investigation."

*The Mothers:*

The mothers were patient, attentive, and sweet with their children, working within the crowded and difficult environment to keep some control over the behavior or their children, their dietary intake, and their schedule. On the first days I was in the Pavilion, women thanked me for all we had done and did not complain for the mistakes that had been made. They were grateful for our attempts to get air mattresses for the pregnant mothers. Some were friendly and engaged in conversation, while others did not welcome our efforts to visit. Some who were previously sullen or reluctant to speak would brighten when they learned we were not CPS; others said they been lied to by everyone and would not alter their viewpoints about our team either.

I sat with Audrey while three of her children were removed for six hours of questioning. She cried but then apologized for crying, saying she did not want to be a "burden" to her sisters. She also denied feeling angry, even though her eyes flashed at the CPS worker who had denied her the ability to speak to her children as they were lead away. She said that remaining serene and polite through such a trial would only serve to make her stronger in her faith. While she waited for news of her children, she returned to her cot and to her other children. Amazingly, none of the other mothers acknowledged her or came to comfort her. (My interpretation is that Audrey has been trained not to feel her true feelings, and that the other women were afraid to be seen as associating with someone whose children may have revealed secrets.) At the end Audrey (pregnant) was ferried to the shelter while her six children were split among three placement locations. After she was whisked away I sat with her oldest child, Rose, age 12, while we labeled her mother's additional belongings in a bag and hoped it would be delivered to her. Rose was obviously distraught and not eager to trust anyone, though she did tell me what she had heard from her lawyer about the sites where the children would be sent the following day.

I saw Jeannetta rocking her 4 month old baby boy in a chair on the afternoon of April 23. I could see what I interpreted as anguish on her face, so I approached her and asked how she was. She began to weep almost immediately and I invited her into a screened area where the women could nurse their babies. She was terribly distraught, and I gave her information about the effects of stress, the likelihood of depression and the possible treatments. Her eyes revealed pain but they welcomed me to continue. I comforted and

tried to find some hope for a speedy resolution. I did not get to see her the following day when she and her infant were separated from her older children. This woman's mental health status is in grave danger, in my opinion.

On Wednesday, April 23, I also visited with Pauline who told me that she intended to leave the ranch and to move to the closest city to her children, wherever they were moved, in order to be able to visit them as much as possible. She was more committed to her children than any convenience for herself. The next morning 40 women boarded the bus to the shelter, including Pauline. To my knowledge none of these women actually wanted to leave her home on the ranch, but they felt they had no option if they wanted to see their children.

Some of the supposedly underage mothers spoke to me, revealing that they were indeed over twenty but the judge had declared that they appeared younger so they also must stay. Some did indeed look very young, and I also thought they might be underage. One extremely pretty young mother talked to me and said that her name was the same name as her mother. I asked if it wasn't customary for a woman to take her husband's name when she married, and she said she couldn't talk about that and quickly turned away. I had stepped into a sensitive area of conversation.

Many complained that this was only a way to prevent them from practicing their religion. They quoted Bible verses and said they had expected to be persecuted for their religion. I told them that we too learned Bible verses, and that despite all their training otherwise, there are some good people out in the world, some who care about these women and their children's welfare.

### *Children*

The children were sweet and well-mannered upon our arrival. They obeyed their mothers and appeared to be healthy and well-nourished. They were curious about us and asked questions about nail polish, hair-cuts, jewelry, and about how we spoke. They wanted to be busy and asked to rake, sweep, or wash windows, since without toys in their society, these were the "fun" activities open to them. They played awkwardly with balls that had been given to them, though as the days progressed, I saw the children having a wonderful time and developing some skill as they played actual games with the CPS workers. The children laughed easily and gave eye contact. They had none of the traditional withdrawal common in abused children.

On the last day of my stay at the coliseum (April 24), the mothers had been removed, with the exception of those who were minors or suspected of being minors. The children had cried bitterly on the removal of the mothers, and they were now with strangers. The noise level went up several decibels as crying and running and screaming took over. Children were grabbing toys from others and using the toys as play weapons against each other and their "captors." In my estimation they were acting out their fear and anger. One little boy of about four was frantically running from the CPS workers, avoiding capture in

every way he could. Once caught, I held him firmly in my arms while he wept that he didn't want them to take his mother.

### *Child Protective Services (CPS) Personnel*

I personally did not see some of the individual acts of rudeness or intolerance viewed by some of the others in our group. I did see some wonderful interactions with CPS and some of the children, as they read stories and played games. One young man sat two hours, comforting a toddler after his mother was taken. However, some of them seemed to be thoughtless in their dress or in their blunt demeanor. Some were totally invested in the CPS philosophy and others had questions about the wisdom of the plan. However, the CPS philosophy itself was the primary problem. I also saw a woman I know personally had been a prison principal now employed with CPS. She seemed to have retained an attitude that these people were inmates!

The philosophy is one that removes ALL children from a home in which only one child is suspected of being abused. Since this sect lives in such a communal setting, CPS interpreted all 460+ children as being in one family. They believed they were rescuing the children from abuse and that the mothers were also guilty since they had not protected the children from the suspected perpetrators. CPS had as their primary focus the sexual abuse that was alleged, rather than the emotional abuse that I felt they were creating.

CPS said they were worried about safety, so numbers of events occurred in which centered on a very strict interpretation of safety. For instance, a mother's request to use a blender to make baby food was denied, since the blender was considered dangerous. Toddlers standing on their cots or babies covered with blankets in their beds were considered safety hazards and CPS commanded the mothers to alter the situation. The mothers had not been charged with a crime, and yet their cell phones were removed, since, I presume, CPS had determined that there might be conversations with outside individuals to plan to kidnap the children. Also as a safety caution, the children in the coliseum were not allowed to go to the neighboring football field to play but were kept on a small, dusty corner of the grounds.

CPS showed a disregard and disrespect for the mothers' culture in various ways. We were advised to dress in ways to build trust and foster communication, but obviously CPS had not been so advised. On the morning we arrived at the Pavilion, a CPS worker in snug red capris was given the responsibility of photographing each child and each mother prior to their physical examinations. Tight, revealing clothes were worn daily by many of those in the Pavilion, and bare arms, feet, and legs were standard, even though FLDS custom is to stay covered except for hands and face.

The living quarters at Fort Concho and the coliseum were crowded, uncomfortable, and inconvenient. The cots were too close, allowing infections to spread rapidly. Quickly many children became sick with upper respiratory illnesses. There was no privacy for even a moment of conversation or solitude. The food was sufficiently different from their normal diet causing digestive upsets. Mothers requested that some of the sugary

treats be put away since the children were indiscriminately sampling all through the day. Showers were few in number, generously manned by volunteers from Texas churches. The families had not had enough clothing for more than two days, so dirty laundry was a constant problem, and again the facilities were meager. One mother told me that CPS had allowed her only one bag to pack for herself and six children. I was told that on one night the laundry failed to return the washed sheets and blankets to one of the barracks, and the group had to sleep on bare cots on a very cool evening.

Sleeping was very difficult, with great numbers of CPS workers there to watch every move and record all activities. One woman told me that the mothers were afraid to sleep because they feared the children would be removed while they slept. Therefore the mothers arranged for some of their own group to stay awake all night to monitor the CPS workers! The woman told me they were particularly uncomfortable with how many men were assigned to watch them. Nap times were also very difficult, since the light level remained too bright, and the noise level was always too high for most people to be able to fall asleep.

On the Thursday morning, April 24, 2008, I witnessed a young mother named Rosinith be required by CPS to board the bus back to the ranch, though her young child was in the hospital with 104 degree fever and even though the child's physician had personally requested the mother's presence at the hospital. This event haunts me still, and I cannot imagine such a heartless act.

I spent hours contemplating the scenes I had witnessed, and I listened with an open ear to the news commentary and special documentaries on television. I believe in a free and democratic society where women are equal to the men and are allowed to make choices and even mistakes on their own. I believe older adults should protect young men and women and not take advantage of their youth and inexperience for their own sexual pleasure. I do not believe in polygamy and I see that as a proof that the men in this sect see women as property. I do believe that we should do what is necessary to convince this community to abandon these practices as non-essential to their religion. However, I also know the research on long-term consequences of removing children from loving parents. I do believe that the emotional abuse of all 460+ children must be weighed in the equation.