

Marie's Story

Jane Fullam

Marie shuffles into the 6x6 waiting room. Black-brown hair covers most of her face, which is blank. It registers nothing, neither interest nor surprise. An initial guess puts her at age six, but, court papers say she is nine. She gives no indication she hears the nurse introduce my husband, Bill, and me as her Court Appointed Special Advocates. (CASAs)

We make clumsy attempts at conversation. She is mute.

We know two things about her. She likes art, - and she has genital warts.

We've armed ourselves with a slew of crayons, pens, colored pencils, and paper. She digs through the bag of goodies, snaps it shut.

"We can't have no pencils in here." she says flatly.

Then, wrapping herself in her knitted cape, she slumps onto the small sofa, and falls into a deep sleep, that cocoons her away from our intrusion.

Poor Bill. I urged him into this volunteer position. He wasn't sure he wanted to give up golf for a commitment like this. Now, watching this delicate child, he shakes his head.

"How could *anyone* hurt this little girl?" he asks, knowing the warts are a clear sign of sexual abuse.

Marie is the state's youngest inmate. Hours from family, we are her first visitors. She's been here three weeks. The state mental hospital was never meant for children. Its cold, stone walls are void of decoration or color. But, when she and a companion were playing Marie's new game, the child earned her place here.

"Run with this rope all the way across the street," Marie instructed as she took the other end and wrapped it tightly around her neck.

"I think Marie wanted to kill herself," the foster mom cried frantically into the phone.

Originally removed from her home because of a violent domestic dispute, the child's suicide gesture required follow up at the local hospital.

During her exam, tiny Marie announced she was probably getting her period.

"How do you know this?" they asked her.

"I noticed blood. My two sisters told me about it."

Nothing about Marie indicates physical precociousness. Menstruation in a girl of her size is impossible. The Sexual Abuse Nurse Expert (SANE) was called in. Marie and the nurse chatted.

"My mom has the same thing," Marie declared.

The nurse kept the conversation casual while she tried to determine who had hurt Marie. That's when Marie clammed up.

"I told once before and no one did anything about it." was all she uttered.

Marie's case took us on a long journey with mixed results. As her CASAs, we searched old DFCS files and found numerous allegations of abuse. Each was labeled *unsubstantiated*, meaning simply that abuse could not be *proved*. And, unfortunately without proof, the state cannot act to remove a child.

We then met with the SANE nurse. She reiterated that Marie's past allegations named her stepfather.

"He is the one. Y'all need to believe this child."

When Marie's stepfather was diagnosed with AIDS and Marie's diagnosis was the same, he was arrested. His "no contest" plea saved the child from testifying and put him in prison for at least ten years.

Marie's story is not pretty. It has no fairy tale ending. Despite the child's dread diagnosis Marie's mother still did not believe her child, - chose to side with her husband. Without her mother's support, the Department of Children and Family Services appealed to the Judge to keep Marie in foster care.

However, the therapist told us "If Marie does not go home to her mother, prepare for her funeral. Marie cannot thrive without her mother. Without her, she is refusing to take the huge amounts of medication she required to survive."

With more time than any of the assigned attorney or the state's Special Attorney General, we had time, as CASAs, to investigate all aspects of HIV and AIDS, We relied on doctors, therapists, social workers from Atlanta's leading experts at Grady Hospital. To this day, so much misinformation about the disease exists, but we were able to enlighten the court when necessary. With the therapist's words ringing in our ears, acting in the best interest of the child, we advocated for Marie's return to her mom, knowing full well this placement is not ideal.

How much better it would be for Marie to have her mother's total support! Yet, each child yearns for her biological family. No matter how she has been hurt. And no child demonstrates this more clearly than Marie.

There is hope for Marie. AIDS is no longer an automatic death sentence. Though Marie has been immeasurably damaged, with maturity, perhaps, she will be able to identify how the adults in her family, including her own mother, hurt her.

May she move on to a more healthy life.

To learn more about becoming a CASA volunteer or donating to CASA, contact Janet Walden, Executive Director, CASA of Forsyth County at 770-886-4082.