

'I'm never going to keep my mouth shut again'

Local groups aim to turn tragedy into hope.



A group of people who say they're determined to help protect children, such as a South Bend boy beaten to death in November, meets last month. "There's something in my gut," says one organizer, Monica Tetzlaff, "that says there's something wrong with this system." (South Bend Tribune/ROBERT FRANKLIN / January 9, 2012)

KATE MALONE AND VIRGINIA BLACKS South Bend Tribune

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SOUTH BEND -- Henry Brunner's nephew had come to visit one night last year, and his side was hurting him.

Brunner recalls that when he took a look at the boy, he saw a bruise and laceration around his groin area. The child, now 10, eventually admitted that his mother's boyfriend had beaten him with a belt. But it was OK, the boy told him, because he had been "bad."

Brunner and his wife, Lisa, began a legal battle to become guardians of the child, which ended earlier this month as the boy was returned home.

It was during the maelstrom of their experience in a "very, very confusing" system that they, along with the rest of Michiana, learned the horrific details of 10-year-old Tramelle Sturgis' beating death in November.

The Brunners attended a vigil for Tramelle -- and decided they would not stop there.

"The Tramelle Sturgis thing just clicked things in my brain, and my wife's, too," Brunner says, recalling being asked at the time to talk to a TV crew.

"We never wanted the spotlight," he says of a previous reluctance to involve himself in situations they've witnessed over the years involving neighborhood children. But "it was in that instant I said, 'You know what? I'm never going to keep my mouth shut again.'"

Pushing for change

Brunner is not alone. He has joined others who began talking after a walk related to Tramelle's death.

One organizer, Cheryl King, recalls that some people stayed afterward, saying, "This was a nice walk, but we've got to do something else."

So the handful of people have formed a community group they hope can make a difference.

April Natynka and Melissa Nemeth live in a house right next door to where the boy was beaten to death, allegedly by his father, who is also charged with abusing other children in the house.

The two women also joined the group, which is called Our Hands for Humanity.

"I was never political before," Natynka says. "This has really kind of woken me up."

Of the initiatives Natynka would like to accomplish is to push efforts in local schools to teach children about abuse and neglect.

"We are too lax on our policies on speaking to children," she says, with passion. "Of all the things we've done or have not done, we're not educating them. If it helps one kid, it's done its job."

Indiana Department of Child Services Director James Payne says there is no statewide standard to educate schoolchildren on abuse issues, but individual communities may choose among child abuse education programs already out there, such as Good Touch Bad Touch.

"This issue of child protection is often thrown at the feet of government and often DCS," Payne says. "But the real issue is, What is the family doing? What is the neighborhood and what is the community doing? Because that's where the best effort is engaged in."

Reaching children

For at least the last seven years, the Diocese of Fort Wayne-South Bend has taught a program about recognizing and speaking up about abuse to children in preschool through eighth grade.

The diocese believes the program, called Safe Environment, will help children suffering abuse to say something and know that it's not their fault, says Catherine Cicchiello, the diocese Safe Environment coordinator.

In taking a stand for kids in abusive homes, Brunner says, "You've got to be brave, just like those kids are."

King, who lives down the street from the Sturgis home, says several DCS employees and a couple of police officers attended the group's last meeting, where such topics as what defines child abuse and how the system works were better defined for them. King says they want to learn more themselves so that they can encourage others in the community to help.

They also want to see how they can change the process, she says.

"The community is very angry. We're watching," King says of what happened to Tramelle. "We don't want this to happen again."

Meanwhile, a separate group of local child welfare advocates plans a three-part television series to air on WNIT during April, Child Abuse Prevention Month.

"Child Abuse: Our Silent Crisis" will air at 8 p.m. April 12, 17 and 26 and include commentary from a variety of local child welfare professionals.

The first episode will focus on recognizing and reporting child abuse, and the second will focus on consequences. The final episode will be an "Ask an Expert" format where the public can ask questions from the audience and by phone.

Tramelle's legacy

On Dec. 23, Angela Bennett says, she saw a mother across the street hit her young son -- and the South Bend woman thought of Tramelle.

She ran inside her Sherman Avenue home and called 911.

"It really made me make that decision to call the police because of the way she hit him," Bennett told The Tribune later. "You don't hit no child like that with your fist. He is only 11."

Bennett said she believes the phone call may have saved the boy's life.

South Bend police officer Dominic Hall reported that as he pulled up to the scene, the boy was running from his house, bleeding from the face. He told Hall that his mom had hit him repeatedly with an extension cord and a steel chair, and that he had escaped by climbing out his bedroom window.

The boy was taken by ambulance to Memorial Hospital while his mother was arrested and charged with felony battery to a child.

"There's so much child abuse going on nowadays ... you never know how long it's been going on or how deep it might go," Bennett says. "I hate to be the one that if I didn't help, he'd be injured in the hospital, half-dead."