

N.J. must not stand idly by

By TOM BLATNER

I was 17 years old when Kitty Genovese died. I remember it as if it were yesterday. For those too young to know or who don't remember, Genovese was a 38-year-old woman on her way home from work who was brutally and fatally assaulted three times over a half-hour period in the courtyard of her apartment complex in New York City while scores of neighbors witnessed the unfolding tragedy, doing nothing to intercede, not even to call the police. During the trial of Genovese's alleged assailant, one witness stated the truth in stark and simple terms: "We didn't want to get involved."

Today, New Jersey has become the epicenter of another national tragedy: The remains of 7-year-old Faheem Williams, along with two surviving brothers, were discovered by Newark police in a locked basement during the first week of January. The revelation that these children and their family had a long history of involvement with the New Jersey Division of Youth and Family Services triggered a firestorm of shock, finger-pointing and recrimination about the shortcomings of the state agency whose legal charge is to protect children. The tragedy and its aftermath have resulted in a series of positive actions by the governor and commissioner of Human Services designed to shore up the flagging system. I have never been an apologist for government in general, nor DYFS in particular, but I have come to grips with the limitations and reach of government. Protective services for children, a statutory responsibility of government, must be corrected through additional resources, tighter procedures and supervision and a good old-fashioned dose of aggressive accountability. Communications between protective services and police must be formalized and carried out with precision and professionalism. The best investigative and diagnostic techniques and decision-making must be brought to bear once child maltreatment is alleged. But let us not think that government reforms and additional public resources alone represent a solution to the horrifying phenomenon of child abuse and neglect.

The safety and well-being of children begin at their birth. The bonding and nurturing, health and trust that children experience during the first years of life set the stage for the journey ahead. If children do not get what they need in the early and most vulnerable years of their lives, they are destined to difficulty and danger. As they wind their way toward adulthood, children are ultimately dependent on the good will and responsibility of an ever-widening sphere of community and citizen representatives. Should problems arise, a full spectrum of professional and voluntary help and support is available. If we acknowledge that the formal protective entities - police and DYFS - become involved only after alleged incidents of child maltreatment occur and that these entities can remain involved only if abuse and neglect is proven or substantiated, we come face to face with the realization that the collective we, the citizens of New Jersey from all walks of life, must become equal partners with our government if we are to have any reasonable chance to reclaim and secure the safety and well-being of our children.

How and what can we do?

We can learn. We can become aware of the prevalence of child maltreatment in our own communities. We can learn about what every child needs to have a decent chance at life, what the warning signs of trouble are, what to do and where to go to get help and who to call if child safety becomes a concern. We can become more aware of the safety and well-being of our own

children and the children of friends and neighbors. We can learn about the many community groups and organizations available to help and support children and families.

We can act. We can convene and participate in discussions with colleagues, relatives, friends, children, faith leaders, teachers and community members about children. We can become involved as volunteers and supporters of children at school, places of worship, work and in the community. We can befriend adults and children who need a friend. We can encourage those who need help, both loved ones and strangers, to get help. When we have legitimate concerns about the safety of children, we can pick up the phone, report the concerns, participate in investigations and, if necessary, speak the truth in court.

We can vote. We can learn the opinions and performance of our appointed and elected officials with regard to issues involving children. With our voices and the power of the ballot, we can hold our public officials accountable to the interests of children.

We can celebrate our children and mourn their losses. Through learning, action and participation, we can re-create an environment of safety and security for our children. By stepping to the fore with and on behalf of our young, we can find that collective hard work, sacrifice, effort and risk can lead to a sense of reward and a record of result that we experience all too rarely in this post-modern world.

Gov. James E. McGreevey reacted to the death of Faheem Williams with a mixture of anger, disgust and sadness. As time slips by and the headlines recede, one can almost hear his handlers pushing him away from the issues of child safety. After all, abused and neglected children hardly represent a strong constituency and what politician has made a career involving him or herself in DYFS? As I travel the state and listen to the news, I sense that McGreevey's future, both political and otherwise, might be better served by building on what appears to be his very real emotions, using his position to reach out to all citizens in every community across the Garden State, leading the mobilization of a visible and vibrant partnership of citizens and government on behalf of children and unabashedly doing what is right.

Vincent Mosely, Genovese's assailant, was asked after his trial why he believed that he could return to continue his assault after he fled the scene with the knowledge that neighbors were watching. His reply, "I knew they wouldn't do anything; they never do." In New Jersey, we can, we must and we shall do something.

Tom Blatner, president of JANUS Solutions, served as the director of DYFS during the Kean administration.

The Star Ledger Archive

Date: 2003/02/27 Thursday Page: Section: Editorial Edition: Size: 1054 words