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## Foster Parents: Who Are They? *Reality v. Perception* Part II

*On any given day, on any given newsstand or television station, you can find a heartbreaking story about a child harmed while in foster care. These are inevitably followed by opinion pieces that categorically decry the child welfare system responsible for these terrible incidents. Between these periodic horror stories, the children and the many organizations that care for them are largely invisible to us, and we are left with the lingering impression that nothing good can come from the child welfare system.*

Ruth Massinga, Executive Director of Casey Family Programs,  
writing in the *Oakland Tribune*, June 12, 2004

### by Bill Grimm and Julian Darwall

This is the second of a two-part series that looks at foster parents – who they are, who the public thinks they are, and how the public’s perceptions of them is shaped by newspapers, magazines, and books, as well as movies and television.

**PART I** (in the July-Sept. 2005 issue of YLN) looked at the latest research and information about foster parents – their age, education, employment, length of service, and motivations. Since instances of foster parent abuse generate headlines in many newspapers, we concluded Part I with what we know about abuse in foster families.

**PART II** explores how foster parents are portrayed in the media, and how that shapes the public’s perceptions of foster parents. It includes the results of a study of newspaper coverage of foster parents across the country during a one-year period. It also includes a review of how foster parents are depicted in recent popular novels, Hollywood movies, and television.

The National Center for Youth Law (NCYL) undertook a study of media portrayals of foster parents in 2005. As discussed in Part I, the NCYL initiative was motivated by the findings of a 2003 survey by the Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care.<sup>1</sup> The Pew results found that a significant portion of the general public has a negative image of foster parenting, and that more than half of respondents depend on the news and media for their knowledge and impressions of foster care and foster parents.

To find out how foster parents are portrayed in the popular media, NCYL surveyed newspapers, magazines, mainstream Hollywood movies, television, and popular novels. A comprehensive, systematic study of newspaper and magazine coverage found it to be generally evenhanded, and containing a high percentage of positive portrayals.<sup>2</sup> However, front-page stories about problems plaguing the foster care system and foster parents’ abuse of children in their care were

common. Television, with its penchant for crime dramas like “Law and Order” and “CSI,” generally portrays foster parents as malevolent. Hollywood movies and popular literature, too, consistently pit an abusive or uncaring foster parent against child protagonists.

So, while there is a considerable amount of positive coverage overall in the media, the positive portrayals are heavily outweighed by negative ones, particularly in movies, television, and popular fiction.

These portrayals of foster parents are made for an audience largely ignorant of who foster parents are, what they do, and why they choose to open their homes to foster children. Most members of the general public do not have relatives or friends who are foster parents. Most do not know a foster parent. Few have ever been in juvenile or dependency court. In the absence of such direct knowledge, they depend on a variety of popular media to inform their opinions and impressions. Based on the

<sup>1</sup> The Pew study report is located at <http://pewfostercare.org/research/docs/survey050703.pdf> (last visited 9/22/05).

<sup>2</sup> A Proquest Newsstand search was conducted for a one-year period (June 2004-June 2005) under the search term “foster parent.” The Proquest database includes more than 350 local, regional, national, and international newspapers. From 20 categories, four composite data groups were formed: positive image, negative image, recruitment, and systemic problems.

portrayal of foster parents in various forms of media, it is not surprising that the public has an inaccurate view of foster parents and foster children. Given how powerfully some of the abusive images are conveyed, it is no wonder that a substantial number of people view foster parents as self-interested and uncaring.

Specific findings of NCYL's research are described in the sections that follow. First is a discussion of a random sample of popular fiction, television, and movies. This portion of the research turned up a significant number of negative images. Then, a thorough and systematic examination of newspapers and magazines is discussed—revealing a more nuanced understanding of the means through which audiences receive written information that may impact their thinking about the foster system and foster parents.

### Hollywood Movies

Hollywood foster parents tend to resemble the archetypal evil stepmother—a person who takes in children out of self-interested motives, while maintaining an acceptable outer image that cloaks child maltreatment. Most recent major films involving foster parents have built off this model, possibly because the stories of people who have blossomed in spite of early injustices are deeply inspiring. Most of the films discussed here are based on popular books.

In the autobiographical film *Antwone Fisher*, the woman who fosters Antwone abuses her foster children repeatedly. In a nightmarish scene, Antwone and his foster brother are tied to a pole in a dark basement and whipped. In other scenes, the foster mother threatens Antwone with fire, and her adult daughter molests him. Meanwhile, the foster mother portrays herself to the world as a fervently religious and caring woman, beset by the young savages she has taken into her home. *Antwone Fisher*, starring Denzel Washington, earned nearly \$21 million at the box office.

In the first week of DVD and VHS releases it brought in another \$26 million. It is frequently shown on cable television stations.

The movie *White Oleander* is based on a book about a young girl's experiences in a number of foster homes. Its cast of caregivers expands the Hollywood version of foster parents to new areas of instability and self-interest. The film made \$16 million at the box office and was top in video rentals in the country for two weeks.

Starr, the first foster mother of the movie's child protagonist, Astrid, is an ex-stripper and drug addict who has become a born-again Christian. Starr's fostering role provides her only income, but according to Robin Wright Penn, the actress who portrays her, Starr also "believes that this philanthropic lifestyle is going to make up for her past and keep her clean."<sup>3</sup> When Astrid becomes intimate with Starr's boyfriend, the foster mother shoots her in the back, and Astrid is then consigned to a large youth institution.

She is next taken in by Claire Richards (played by Renee Zellweger), a B-movie actress and her husband. Astrid feels accepted quickly and describes her second day with Claire as the best day of her life. But Astrid is unaware that the couple has taken her in primarily to offer support to Claire, a self-described "broken person," who has recently attempted suicide. Just when Astrid believes she is finding stability, Claire overdoses on medication and alcohol, and the placement abruptly ends.

Finally, when her social worker attempts to match Astrid with Bill and Ann Greenway, who appear to be solid, veteran foster parents, Astrid instead chooses outlandish Rena, a Russian émigré who uses the many foster girls crowding her home to salvage merchandise to sell at flea markets. Astrid, apparently, has abandoned hope for happiness in foster care.

In the 1992 movie *Candy Candy* (1992), orphaned Candice White watches as other children are

adopted. Eventually, she is taken in by foster parents who want a playmate for their daughter, Eliza. However, Eliza has no intention of befriending Candy, and she and her brother make Candy's life miserable. Similarly, in *The Glass House* (2001), orphans Ruby and Rhett Baker are sent to live with former neighbors who are motivated by the possibility of gaining some of the \$4 million that the children will inherit.

Movies made for children frequently replay the uncaring caretaker stereotype. Harry Potter is victimized by his kinship foster parents, his aunt and uncle, who spoil their biological son, Dudley. In the Hollywood production of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, Dudley is deluged with gifts while Harry is forced to live in a crawl space under the stairs.

Similarly, Lemony Snicket's *A Series of Unfortunate Events* is actually a succession of disastrous kinship placements. After the Baudelaire parents are killed in a fire, the children are placed in the care of a bank manager who gives them over to their dastardly relative, Count Olaf. The Count promises to take care of them "as if they were actually wanted," but in fact he desires their money and attempts to murder them in order to collect it. The children are then placed with their Uncle Monty, who is soon murdered by Count Olaf. Finally they are sent to live with their Aunt Josephine and her multitudinous phobias.

While these children's movies are typical in their portrayal of foster parents as cruel and uncaring, there are a few movies that portray foster parents in a positive light. In *Big Daddy*, Adam Sandler's character takes in a boy in order to prove to his girlfriend that he can be a mature adult. But Sandler develops a strong bond with his foster son and struggles to retain custody. In *Yours, Mine and Ours*, Rene Russo, a widow with a household of foster children she adopted, marries Dennis Quaid, who has eight children. The two families become one.

<sup>3</sup> <http://mzone.mweb.co.za/residents/adamskat/wo-pro.htm>.

## Television

Using search engines like Google and Yahoo, a search for portrayals of foster parents in television programming yielded few results. Networks' site-wide search engines were surveyed to pinpoint particular episodes and series involving foster care. Many network sites supply episode summaries of current programming and access to previous season summaries. Since some of the relevant programs were not available on DVD and it was logistically difficult to watch individual episodes, NCYL researchers used the summaries to assess whether foster care/foster parents were shown in a positive, neutral, or negative light.

With few exceptions, television's portrayal of foster caregivers was found to be very negative. In most cases police or physicians discover caregivers' abuse or neglect of the foster children in their home. In some instances these negative portrayals are based on "true stories." Shows that are advertised as based on real-life stories may have a significant impact on the minds of viewers.

Among television programs, foster care is most often found in the story lines of crime and medical dramas. Audiences for "Law and Order," "The Division," "Cold Case Files," and other crime dramas more often than not see abusive rather than caring foster parents. Episodes of "Law and Order" usually cover the foster parent as criminal, with stories like that of a 5-year old girl murdered in foster care while her biological mother is frantically trying to regain custody, or that of a child who runs away from an abusive foster home. Two-thirds of the crime dramas reviewed in a one-year period that had foster care in the story line presented a clearly negative portrayal of foster parents. In these dramas, foster caregivers were represented as incompetent or abusive individuals who were less capable of caring for children than the biological parents. Similar themes were also found in medical dramas such as "ER."

In contrast to the crime and medical shows, "Judging Amy," a drama about a single mother who becomes a

family court judge, often presented a sympathetic, dedicated foster parent who opens her home to sibling groups or children with disabilities. But even this show portrayed an artist using her foster children as nude models, and a prostitution ring operating out of a group home. Occasionally, "Judging Amy" has taken the system to task, as in one episode in which a social worker confronts the DCF commissioner over his budget cuts. Last year "Judging Amy," the one program that tended to present foster parents in a positive light, was cancelled, but some of the crime dramas—particularly the "Law and Order" franchises—are broadcast several times a day on more than one channel.

An area of television programming that was not included in the survey was local news. However, a cursory sampling of news programs in several markets revealed that television news frequently picks up, repeats, or elaborates on stories from the newspapers. This anecdotal information suggests that many, if not most, of these TV news stories are negative and often involve criminal prosecutions of foster parents.

## Popular Fiction

Two recent novels by popular mystery/thriller writers Jonathan Kellerman and James Patterson present disturbing portraits of foster parents. Kellerman's *Rage* begins with the kidnapping and brutal murder of a three-year old girl. The mystery unfolds around a foster father's connection to the teenage boys who committed the murder. While appearing to take in adolescents for the right reasons, this foster father and his wife have terrible secrets that include their greedy manipulation of the child welfare system and sexual abuse. *Rage* had the biggest opening week of any of Kellerman's novels published since 1985.

James Patterson's *Fourth of July* centers on murders directed by a woman who runs a shelter for abused and neglected children who are runaways from the system. The attacks are on abusive parents.

However, author Dave Pelzer dedicated the second book in the autobiographical series *The Lost Boy* to his foster parents, Harold and Alice Turnbough. In the epilogue, he wrote:

As for my foster parents, they made me the person I am today. They took in a heap of hideous mass and transformed a terrified child into a functional, responsible human being.... The Turnboughs were a godsend, with something so simple as teaching me how to walk, talk, and act like a normal child, while assuring me that I was worthy and could overcome any challenge that life had to offer.... The general public rarely, if ever, hears of the love and compassion for what some folks dub F-parents—as if the words foster parent belonged to a deadly epidemic.

Pelzer, now a popular motivational speaker, has appeared on various talk shows—"Larry King Live," "Oprah," and others. In many of these appearances, he talks about his foster parents, saying they "never get a fair shake," and explaining that their investment of time and energy in him made a significant difference.

## Newspapers

NCYL conducted a much more comprehensive and systematic review of newspapers and magazines. The search revealed that this coverage is much more evenhanded, and contains a considerable amount of positive portrayals of foster parents.

The walls and tabletops in Roger and Imogene Gorsuch's home are lined with photos of their extra children—all 233 of them. After 45 years as foster parents, taking in mostly infants and toddlers of many nationalities and skin colors, the 86-year-old couple finally decided to call it quits... Whether sick or well, it didn't matter, Imogene wrote.... They were ours already—13 different cultures, seven sets of twins, physically or

developmentally delayed, abused crack babies, profoundly retarded, tiny preemies, or with severe medical problems all needing tender, loving care.

*Tennessee's Favorite Foster Parents to Quit; 86-Year-Old Couple Took in 233 Children, Charleston Daily Mail (December 13, 2004)*

Positive articles comprised nearly two-thirds of all articles in the newspaper study. Personal interest articles—perhaps surprisingly, given the Pew Commission results—formed the largest subcategory; they comprised almost one-third of the total and 13 percent more articles than the total of negative articles. However, negative articles made up more than 37 percent of all articles, and most of those covered incidents of foster parent abuse.

The positive image articles were divided into four subcategories:

- Personal interest—145 articles
- Positive comments—40 articles
- Award mentions—20 articles
- Positive image-based recruitment—11 articles

The overwhelming bulk of the articles provided compelling role models for prospective foster parents. Many reporters described foster parents as unsung heroes. While a disproportionate number of these articles (13 percent) were prompted by the 2005 May National Foster Care Month publicity effort, many personal interest articles were published throughout the year.

The research suggests that, while personal interest stories appear once, news articles about children abused in foster care are repeated or elaborated upon in several editions of the newspaper first reporting it. As expected, positive portrayals of the individual foster parent were rarely repeated. Many abuse cases were mentioned

in only one newspaper article, although a number of more highly publicized cases received coverage of four to eight articles each. Sixty cases of abuse were described in 96 stories—an average of less than two stories per case (1.6). Thus, complaints that newspapers give undue attention to cases of foster parent abuse and neglect are not altogether justified. Several reasons may account for the relatively small number of follow-up stories. Reporters quickly move on to the next important story or catastrophe. Even those reporters interested in pursuing further stories about abuses in care may be stymied by confidentiality rules. This is particularly true when there is no criminal prosecution or when a plea bargain averts a public trial.<sup>4</sup>

Another aim of the newspaper study was to shed some light on foster parent recruitment efforts.<sup>5</sup> When compared with a composite of neutral recruitment articles, including information on lack of foster parents, orientation announcements, and recruiter notices, articles that illustrated more deeply the reasons to foster a child were scarce. Recruitment articles that employed examples of foster parents, or made other significant efforts to describe foster parents in a positive light, consisted of only 17 percent of articles that aimed to recruit and/or report the need for foster parents. Such a high ratio of neutral requests for foster parents might prove unappealing to a public already conflicted about how to view foster parents. One article noted that a recruiter's powerful singing and speaking about foster parents at a church inspired a wave of calls to foster parent groups. It is doubtful that a few lines on the lack of foster parents would be similarly effective.

The group of articles focusing on problems in the foster care system revealed a large number criticizing

other areas of the system besides foster parents. It is possible that association with a troubled system could hinder foster parent recruitment and injure foster parents' image by association.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, more than 15 years ago, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services observed:

“...the negative descriptions of the child welfare system and occasionally of foster parents that appear in the media have left the general public with a poor perception of foster parenting. These perceptions may affect recruitment efforts as well as making current foster parents feel devalued and sometimes suspect in the eyes of others.”<sup>7</sup>

This effect might be compounded by the standard image of children being coldly “bounced around,” with the implication that foster parents are partly to blame. This misattribution of the many problems in foster care to foster parents seems especially likely given the results of the 2003 Pew Commission survey. Of the negative impressions provided by 28 percent of the 812 respondents in that survey, 77 percent focused on foster parents. Of negative impressions about foster parents, 43 percent specifically indicated that “some parents [are] in it for the money, [and] don't care about kids,” while other responses cited problems with maltreatment or ill-qualified foster parents.<sup>8</sup>

The NCYL newspaper study sample turned up the same number of articles (98) that criticized the system (without criticizing foster parents), as ones that criticized foster parents. This sample did not include the very high number of articles citing systemic problems that did not mention foster parents. Foster parents appear to be an easy target for explaining a complex variety of systemic problems. In the Pew survey, only 22 percent of negative impression respondents cited problems other than foster parents—

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Okla. Stat. tit.10, §7005-1.4(E). Allowing release of otherwise confidential information about a child's death when the person responsible for the child has been criminally charged.

<sup>5</sup> NCYL did not survey classified ads that some agencies employ as part of their recruitment strategy.

<sup>6</sup> HHS 1989 and NFPA 1989 make a similar claim. See Schwarz, N., & Clore, G. (1996), *Feelings and phenomenal experience*; in E. Higgins & A. Kruglanski (Eds.), *Social psychology: Handbook of basic principles*, New York: Guilford, for a discussion of the social cognitive processes possibly at work.

<sup>7</sup> National Foster Parent Association, *The Foster Care System in Crisis*, Houston, Texas, 1989), cited in U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families: *The National Survey of Current and Former Foster Parents*, (1989).

<sup>8</sup> Hart Research/Public Opinion Strategies, April 2003, Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care.

for example, that “some kids get lost in the system,” “not enough follow up,” and other “criticisms of the government/the court/foster care agencies.”<sup>9</sup>

The NCYL study results had certain limitations. The sample was drawn from a set of newspapers with different circulation numbers and reader patterns. Without further analysis of readership data, it cannot be known how many people read the stories. It is possible, for example, that a disproportionate number of personal interest stories occurred in small, local newspapers. Stories posted on the wires by the *Associated Press* and others may get more widespread coverage. No distinction was made between those articles and more local stories.

However, the data do provide a nationwide view of the types of articles reporters are writing and the frequency with which those topics are being covered in newspapers.

## Magazines

A *Reader's Guide to Periodicals* (WilsonWeb Database) search was conducted for the subject “foster home care” from 1985 to 2005. This period was used in order to capture enough articles for analysis. The database includes 379 popular magazine titles on subjects including business, consumer affairs, current events, education, fashion, general interest, fine arts, health and nutrition, and sports.

Generally, magazine coverage tended to be longer and more in depth, though the content was comparable to newspapers'. Magazines, like newspapers, portrayed foster parents in a more positive light than might be expected, given the mixed public opinion about foster parents. A number of recent articles have focused on actress Victoria Rowell, formerly a foster child, who advocates for foster children and parents, and works with foster care groups to develop policy ideas.

Magazine articles over the past two decades have, as a whole, emphasized both foster care systemic problems and personal interest stories. These two types of stories

accounted for almost 60 percent of all articles that might have an impact on the public's image of foster care. The articles in the sample focused much more on positive personal interest stories than on abuse or neglect by foster parents. The ratio was 7.4 to 1. For each five-year data set from the last 15 years, more than a quarter of the total articles were personal interest ones. There were relatively few reports specific to cases of abuse, except in highly publicized instances.

Articles that described systemic problems made up a large percentage of the total. NCYL researchers hypothesized that since magazine articles tended to be broader exposés on foster care's shortcomings and frequently included the “bouncing children” image, that these magazine articles were more likely to negatively affect foster parents' image.

The total amount of reporting, as well as the number of personal interest stories, was significantly higher during the last five years (49 articles) than it had been during any of the other five-year periods, especially 1996-2000, when there was a drop-off in coverage (30 articles). Even given the differences in the amount of reporting, the total positive and negative reporting maintained a relatively even ratio.

In the 2001-2005 sample, 45 percent of all articles positively represented foster parents; 21 percent of articles in the sample (including those about systemic problems) represented foster parents negatively. Only 6 percent of articles in the most recent five-year sample directly represented foster parents negatively.

## Conclusion

This study, despite certain data limitations, illuminates the largely unexamined public discourse surrounding foster parents. It sheds light on how the public's perceptions—highlighted in the Pew Commission study—have been influenced by popular culture. While the newspaper and maga-

zine category is strongly oriented toward facts, both negative and positive, the other media formats frequently place the telling of a compelling story ahead of the need to convey a realistic picture. The unsurprising result—since television and movies reach a much larger and more diverse audience than newspapers—is that much of the public has a negative image of foster parents and the foster care system.

This negative image stigmatizes both foster children and foster parents, and severely undercuts efforts to recruit qualified foster parents. Convincing reporters, writers, and producers to paint a more unbiased view of foster children and parents will require a sustained campaign. Armed with the observations in this article, we hope that advocates will begin that effort by talking with reporters in their communities, meeting with editorial boards, and contacting Hollywood writers and producers, urging them to advance more stories about foster children who have grown up to become productive, successful adults not *in spite of* their foster parents, but *because of* them.

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<sup>9</sup> 2003 Pew Commission Report, page 1, item 2b.