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10 Years of Hope, Trying to Save Abandoned Newborns

By KRISTEN McQUEARY

When Bloomington police officers pulled a newborn baby from a toilet early Sunday, it was the first time in more than a year that an unwanted Illinois infant had been left in a potentially dangerous place.

The police were called to Home Sweet Home Ministries, a homeless shelter, around 4 a.m. after a woman was said to have given birth to a baby and put it in a toilet. The woman, Tonya McKee, a 37-year-old resident of the shelter, faces charges of attempted murder, said David White, public affairs officer at the Bloomington Police Department.

For 10 years, Dawn Geras of Chicago has tracked cases like this one. Ms. Geras is the founder of the Save Abandoned Babies Foundation, a charity she runs out of her home in a downtown high rise. She helped get a state law enacted in 2001, the Abandoned Newborn Infant Protection Act. The law allows parents of babies less than 30 days old to relinquish them, no questions asked, at police stations, fire houses and hospitals.

"I had just posted something on Facebook that we went one year, one month, one week and one day," Ms. Geras said. "And then 12 hours later, I found out about this one," the Bloomington baby.

Since the law was enacted in 2001, 69 Illinois babies have safely been taken to designated sites. The law is designed to make the process anonymous for the parents and safe for the babies. As long as the infant is unharmed and handed directly to staff members, the parents are not prosecuted.

"What's common to these cases is a [pregnancy](#) where the mother fears the consequences if the pregnancy is revealed," said Kendall Marlowe, spokesman for the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services. "As a result, these overwhelmed parents felt they had no option but to discard their child. The 'safe haven' law gives parents in crisis an option to do the responsible thing."

Until Ms. Geras got involved, the department tracked child abandonment cases for anyone under 18, but not infants specifically. The system also put abandoned babies in the [foster care](#) system, an unappealing option. Now, they go directly to adoptive families.

Four years ago, Lori Nicholson and Lesley Millar got a call about a baby girl who had been turned in at a hospital in the Chicago area. At the time Ms. Millar was standing at her office window and noticed a large praying mantis outside on the window sill. She looked it up later. A praying mantis is a sign of good luck.

They drove to the hospital and waited in the lobby.

“The hospital social worker came down and said, ‘Are you waiting on a baby?’ And we said, ‘Yes.’ And she said, ‘You got a keeper.’” Ms. Nicholson said. Now 4 years old, the girl, Aidan Jane, has curly, dark pigtails and chocolate-brown eyes.

Despite the new law and successful [adoptions](#), problems persist. Including the Bloomington newborn, 63 babies have been abandoned illegally during the last 10 years, nearly as many as were taken to the safe havens. They were left at churches, along roadways and, in some cases, thrown in garbage cans. Of those, 30 died before someone found them.

Those are the statistics Ms. Geras dreads.

It was a newspaper article 11 years ago about teen-age Alabama mothers abandoning babies in hospital emergency rooms that motivated Ms. Geras to do something. Officials there were trying to make it legal for mothers to hand over their infants safely, and Ms. Geras decided Illinois needed a safe haven law, too.

“I’ll bet we could figure out something we could do to make a difference,” she remembered telling friends at a cocktail fund-raiser for a charity.

They wrote the bill at her dining room table and spent months lobbying to get it passed. At first, politicians were uncomfortable with the whole idea, and law enforcement officials worried that it would encourage mothers to abandon babies just anywhere without being held accountable.

Ms. Geras understood that, but she said she did not have time for a philosophical debate. So she said she told lawmakers, “If we don’t pass this law now, I can promise you, we’re going to be on your doorstep with that baby’s coffin and hold you accountable.”

Headlines about unsafe abandonments helped her lobbying efforts. A North Carolina couple left a dead newborn in a grocery store restroom. A Minnesota farmer found a baby, still alive, strapped in a car seat along the side of the road.

“The stereotype of this being an urban phenomenon just affecting teen-aged mothers is untrue,” said Mr. Marlowe, of Children and Family Services. The most common factor, he said, is a desire to hide a pregnancy.

One mother found her way to a suburban police station two years ago after having given birth at

home three hours earlier. She handed over her newborn daughter and waited while paramedics came to check the baby. She declined medical attention for herself.

And then she left. The baby girl was the 49th infant relinquished under the act.

The girl is now 2, with strawberry blonde hair and dimples. Her name is Molly. Her parents are Kevin, an accountant, and Tracy, a first-grade teacher. The Chicago News Cooperative agreed to publish only their first names to protect their privacy.

Kevin was treated for leukemia about 10 years ago, and he and Tracy knew they would not be able to have a baby on their own. So they started the adoption process shortly after they married and waited for a birth mother to choose them. One day, they got a phone call about a 16-year-old girl from Moline who was pregnant with a baby boy. They met her. She picked them.

Kevin and Tracy drove to the hospital for the baby's birth. They kept him overnight in their room, gave him his first bath and marveled at his tiny features. But the next day, a hospital social worker stepped into their room with heartbreaking news. The birth mother changed her mind.

"They very politely escort you out of the hospital," Tracy said.

They were devastated. But eight months later, Kevin got another phone call from their adoption agency. Were they interested in meeting Baby 49? Kevin pumped his fists in the air excitedly and said, "Yes, please!"

Kevin and Tracy do not know much about Molly's birth mother, except that "she must have loved Molly because to go through this loving sacrifice, obviously she did," Kevin said. "And she must be darn cute because Molly is."

The Illinois law is one of the strongest in the country and is regularly updated. This year, legislators added police stations on college campuses as safe havens.

Ms. Geras's foundation recently paid for informational posters inside Chicago bus shelters to help spread the word.

She said she was haunted by stories of babies who had been abandoned unsafely. The Bloomington baby found in the toilet was flown to Children's Hospital of Illinois in Peoria; hospital officials declined to disclose the baby's condition.

Now, Ms. Geras is looking at how her organization can reach out to homeless shelters. Maybe there is a gap in the system she can help close, she said.

"This is the first time there has ever been a case like this," she said. "Our volunteers will now be targeting them. Somebody's going to be making some phone calls."

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