

From the first page, Rene draws you into the lives of a family in turmoil. Her reflective description of the inadequacies of the family social service system and lack of coordination is disturbingly haunting. A must read!

Marty Tanner

Whose Best Interest? Is a book that chronicles the lives of two special children who have been subjected to the yo-yo effect of the Social Services system in two states and several cities across the United States. Having parents who can't take care of themselves, who fail at their jobs (in spite of being educated), and who choose self-absorption as a way of life forces these children to endure negligence, abuse, and injustice.

This journal records years of detail in an effort to expose the need for change in within the Department of Family Services, and documents the ongoing struggle of these two children. They continue to be returned to their mother who doesn't and can't take care of them. It is an ingrained way of thinking: a mother should be taking care of her children. Sometimes other options are better. What is best for the children is determined by a system of case workers who have been trained that reunification of the family is the road best traveled, to the point of tunnel vision. Read along and witness the heartbreaking and sometimes funny events that determine the lives Joel and Fancy Free. You will be spellbound with the drama. And you will want resolution.

Ava Munoz

From the first chapter of this emotional roller coaster ride, you will be hooked, as I was. What started out as a journal of facts and occurrences detailing how the Division of Family Services works, turned into a truly heartfelt story. Reading each chapter made me eager to continue to the next, with the hope that these children would remain with a loving family. Rene and her family stepped in and did whatever they could to help Fancy Free and Joel survive and flourish, whether it was financial or emotional. It's heartbreaking to see that the best of intentions and what is right for a child is no match for the legal system. How children can be returned, time and time again to parents that cannot, or won't provide even some of the most basic needs or nurturing is heart rendering. You won't be able to put this story down and definitely will not get it out of your mind when finished.

Gerri Steckel

Whose Best **Interest?**

a fight to save two american kids

Rene Howitt

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Whose Best Interest? A Fight to Save Two American Kids

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Disclaimer

The events that take place in this story are presented from my personal point of view. This is what my heart and eyes experienced. If any other person involved in this account were to put this to paper their version may differ, based on their perspective, history, and personal accountability. All of the names of persons and companies have been changed to protect their identity. All city and county names within the states have also been changed. The movement of the parents within the state of Missouri was limited to a more specific area and therefore no city name is mentioned. However, because the movement of the mother in the state of Alabama encompasses so many different locations I have chosen to name cities that are not the actual locations of where the events took place.

The intent of this book is not to further put into ruin what these adults have already set out to destroy, however to open the eyes of the public as to the short comings of the system I believe we have in place to protect our innocent children. The purpose of this work is to use this story to get the voting public to become upset enough over this issue that politicians know they must change a dysfunctional system. We as a society need to know that our lawmakers and politicians are working towards meaningful and effective changes.

Introduction

Lucas and I met a year and a half before he graduated from college. Shortly after he earned his degree in finance and got a job as a bank examiner, we married. I was twenty-one and Lucas was twenty-three. We spent four years enjoying life with each other before our first child, Lindsay, came along and Lucas started to advance in his career. Three years later we had our second daughter, Nikki, and four years after that Julia was born. All the while, Lucas's banking career continued to advance. When Nikki was two years old I was able to become a stay-at-home mom. By the time she was five, Lindsay was eight, and Julia was two, Lucas had become the president of a large bank and its holding company. With our humble backgrounds, neither of us had ever dreamed it possible.

The downside? All the time Lucas had to spend working and entertaining with clients and potential customers. Our marriage and our friendship felt the strain of time apart. Meanwhile, our girls were very active in soccer, tennis, softball, and dance.

Lucas and I have both always gone the extra mile to remain physically fit and attractive to each other. Over the years, Lucas took up golf and Indian ball. I took up tennis. Lucas's career along with the children's activities and our own led us to drift apart.

Then a series of events began that were largely out of our control. Events if we could have controlled them, may have turned out very differently. However, God controlled things, not us.

Suddenly the board of directors at Lucas's bank decided, in a five-to-four vote, to sell both the bank and the holding company. Lucas was on the losing side of that vote. He was initially offered a position with the purchasers, but they reneged, and Lucas found himself, at the age of forty-four, unemployed. We weren't hurting for money, as we had owned a large stake in the bank, but the impact of losing his job hit Lucas hard.

The bank transaction closed in September 2001. Lucas and I, for the first time, felt unfocused. He enjoyed his freedom, the money, sleeping in, playing an active role in his daughters' lives, and getting to spend time alone with me during the day. We could actually talk uninterrupted. I valued getting to know my husband again as a friend and not just a provider. Still, we were out of sorts. What was he, what were we, supposed to do with the rest of our lives? Our daughters were by now eighteen, fifteen, and eleven. We were over the hump in terms of the workload of child rearing.

That December, another event took place that changed our lives in ways that we could not imagine.

During the two years prior to the sale of the bank, Lucas and I had witnessed the neglect of two children who were very dear to us: Lucas's nephew, Joel, and Joel's half-sister, Fancy Free. We watched the decline of their parents' relationship and emotional stability. We gave

them tremendous financial help and took the children into our home as often as possible to get them away from the madness. In December 2001, it became obvious that the Division of Family Services needed to be made aware of the situation.

Dealing with Family Services and the family court system for more than four years finally prompted me to write this book. Its purpose is not to attack the system our states have in place to provide protection for children such as Joel and Fancy Free, but rather to open the public eye to how the system's shortcomings affect all of us. And to prompt the reader to think about what we can do as communities or as a society to enable the government to change the system.

I'm going to take you along on our journey to fight our way through the system for the sake of Joel and Fancy Free. For a time my husband, Lucas, and I were foster parents to these two beautiful kids, even though Fancy Free is not our blood relative and we knew we had almost no legal chance to keep her.

Keep in mind as you read our story and start to become angry that there are two very legitimate reasons the child welfare system is set up the way it is. First, almost everyone who works within it will tell you that they are restrained financially. Second, this is my own personal observation, there is no place to send the children. What do we do with all of the children in this country who find themselves in abusive or neglectful homes? Maybe because of the system, it appears there just aren't enough responsible, loving adults willing to take these children in. That's the plain truth.

Let's face it: if there were more loving, open homes than suffering children, no system would have to put up with any nonsense from the biological parents of those children. As it is, abusive parents have the upper hand. If the courts gained the upper hand, then they could address more pressing matters. Like enforcing a "Child in Jeopardy" law. If the Division of Family Services has evidence that a child is being severely abused or neglected, the courts should have the right and the obligation to look at this evidence, even if it violates the rights of the parents. What other chance do young children have, who are not allowed to speak for themselves directly to the judge in court? In fact, the whole mission statement of Family Services needs desperately to be addressed. The statement: to "Reunite the Family" because of this mandate every act and every policy is set up with this one goal in mind. Agencies spend vast amounts of money giving parents one chance after another to screw up and then to reform, only to screw up again. Their mission statement should be: "Protect the Child." Err on the side of the children, at least parents are adults who have some understanding, who can get an attorney to fight for them and be a voice for them. What can a child do but cry?

PART ONE

Chapter One

Our second day in Los Cabos, Mexico was bright and sunny, but my thoughts of Fancy Free and Joel were dark. Lucas and I had traveled there to celebrate our twenty-fifth anniversary. When I called home at sunset to check on Julia, she put down her soda and turned her attention from the TV long enough to tell me that her aunt Maria had called with an update on the kids. It was the first update in more than seven months. Once again, Endora had whisked her children away to places unknown. For the rest of that evening, I thought and prayed. As I went to bed I found myself thinking about how the whole ordeal had started.

1998: Six years earlier. Lucas and I had gone to Branson for a three-day banking conference. I didn't want to go. With three daughters between the ages of eight and fifteen, and Christmas approaching, I had more than enough to do at home. But I told myself that everything would get done and I should enjoy a couple of days away with my husband. We arrived late morning, so Lucas decided to blow off the first day's meetings and spend the day with me.

At 4:00 that afternoon, Lucas's brother Richard called. I gleaned from Lucas's end of the conversation that fam-

ily trouble was the subject. The “who” and “why” shocked me, but in hindsight I should have seen it coming. Lucas’s sister Maria had warned me for years that Richard was trouble.

Lucas hung up the phone. “Sit down. You’re not going to believe what I have to tell you.” Richard had gotten involved in an extramarital affair, and now the woman was pregnant with his child. So what? Happens all the time. Not much to write a book about.

Lucas had two brothers and four sisters. Richard was the oldest and Lucas the youngest, twelve years apart. They were all born and raised in Missouri. Lucas and the other five siblings grew up very close; in large families, the attention you can’t get from mom and dad you get from your siblings. But Lucas didn’t get that attention from Richard, who was around very little by the time the youngest came along. Richard also had little patience for Mark and Maria, who were the class clowns. They both goofed off too much.

Richard: that’s what people called him until his life fell apart. When this all started, he was a fifty-four year old assistant prosecuting attorney in Huntsville, Alabama. He had been married for twenty-five years to a Croatian woman named Natasha, and had raised three sons from this marriage, Bert, William, and Joseph, ages fourteen to twenty-five. Richard was a retired colonel in the U.S. Air Force. He had served for twenty years as an attorney and an instructor.

He looked like a typical retired military man: hair cut very short and close to his head, slim, posture tall and

erect. He had an all-legs kind of physique. Not a handsome man, his nose too big and his heavy glasses constantly sliding down, requiring him to constantly push them back up. Despite his well-groomed military appearance, his gait resembled Walter Matthau's, with long, ambling legs that never looked good in jeans, no matter how expensive.

Richard served in Vietnam and came back a decorated hero. After his tour he married Natasha and enrolled in law school. The Air Force paid for his degree, so he would owe them several more years once he obtained it. We never saw much of Richard, what with Natasha, then their first son, duties on the base, and his law studies. His graduation marked the start of a journey with many stops, wherever the Air Force needed him for a time. After a stint in Germany, he returned to the States and his last stop: Alabama. At the end of that assignment he decided he'd had enough of the military, and retired from the Air Force as a colonel. He planned to return to Missouri and become a public prosecutor. This worked for a while, but not for Natasha, especially when Richard decided to start up with an old flame. My guess is that they wanted to keep the marriage together for Bert, William, and Joseph. So they returned to Alabama, where Richard became an assistant prosecutor. They should have done well financially, thanks to Richard's Air Force pension, along with his new salary.

Richard's job became his life. Passionate about his work, he buried himself in it. He loved pursuing the bad guys and watching them as they received the harshest

possible sentence. He bragged about his victories and his unflinching ability to outsmart defense attorneys. His wife, meanwhile, had a lot of time on her hands with all the boys in school. Spending money became a favorite pastime. Richard cared very little for the comings and goings of everyday domestic life, so Natasha handled all of the household decisions, including the boys and the budget.

Richard was a brilliant man by academic standards who fell short in the common sense department. None of us realized this until the story I'm telling began to unfold. He was away from us so much that no one ever had a chance to see him make everyday decisions. Despite the distance, Lucas had always idolized his brother. Richard was the oldest and had achieved great success, and Lucas was the youngest and hoped to do so. It never occurred to Lucas to see the shortcomings in his brother. After being around the family for a while, I concluded that Richard was intelligent but as boring as a chess match. Everyone else in Lucas's family was highly intelligent, but could converse naturally with an average person like me. Try to discuss anything with Richard, from the latest celebrity murder trial to the war in Iraq, and he would talk so far over your head that you'd have to strain your neck to catch the words.

Now, after watching my husband spend five of the last six years helping this man, I see a much more complete picture. Endora was the other woman. She is large and exotic looking, about six feet tall, with ample breasts. I have never seen her thin. She surrounded her dark brown eyes with heavy mascara and eyeliner. High cheekbones

protruded from her face. Her dark hair was thin and flyaway. The kind of hair that is very hard to manage. I sometimes thought that if she was thinner and happier she would be a pretty woman. But she wasn't, and her features painted a picture of deep emotional troubles.

Since my knowledge of her is limited to what she and Richard told us, and she is a habitual liar, and Richard met her only a year before we did, the biography I detail here may or may not be true. She was born and raised in Alabama. When she and Richard met, she was a doctor in her late thirties. Since then, her medical license has been revoked twice, that I know of. The first time she was prosecuted and found guilty of Medicare fraud. Guess who the prosecutor was?

Endora's father died when she was eight or nine years old. Her brother is a doctor, and her sister a professor. Her mother suffered from a serious mental illness that she apparently inherited from Endora's grandparents, and endured several shock treatments back in the seventies that left her looking like a zombie. Endora once revealed that one of her grandparents killed the other and then committed suicide. Assuming these stories were true, Endora was at least the third generation in her family to have severe mental problems. She had been diagnosed with adult ADD, bipolar disorder, and manic depression. Endora and Richard claimed that all of her problems stemmed from ADD. My observations told me that ADD was the least of her problems: I met her mother.

After Endora's father died, she and her siblings were passed around among different family members. They

would live with their mom until she needed more treatment, and then go off to stay with another aunt or uncle. Social Services may have played a role, but I can't be sure. Somehow Endora put herself through college and medical school. Her other siblings can also boast of impressive academic accomplishments. How could someone suffering from such severe ADD get through medical school without anyone noticing and offering treatment? Good question. But she maintains that it's at the root of her problems. Like Richard, I don't think she was blessed with an abundance of common sense.