Momentarily at rest, Kristen Stillman sits with her hands clasped, displaying the tattoos on her forearms: “family” on one, “first” on the other. She keeps her hands clasped as she slowly starts her story, a story of the most dysfunctional family imaginable, a story filled with unspeakable horrors.

It starts with the foggy memories of early childhood. Kristen remembers some good times, mostly involving her twin brother, Will. Her father was never around; her mother, Karen, could only be depended on to be undependable. “I really have no solid memories of Karen,” she says. “She slept and was gone.” They lived in a housing project, in shelters, at friends’ houses. Sometimes Karen was there, sometimes she wasn’t.

“Who leaves children at friends’ houses?” Kristen wonders.

After Karen’s father died — her grandfather was a musician on Blinky’s Fun Club, Kristen thinks — there was some money. “We moved into a nice house and got a nice car...a Camry,” she remembers. “And then we were homeless. We were sleeping in that Camry.”

No place was safe. Both Kristen and Will think they were raped before they were old enough to know what sex was. They think their mother, Karen, was probably on drugs. They think she might have sold them to a stranger for drugs.

Then things got really bad.

The twins were eight and the new school year hadn’t yet started when their mother took them to a house in northwest Denver, on the quiet, tree-lined 2500 block of Irving Street. She told them to wait — Kristen and Will played in the alley — while Karen went up to the door and talked to a man. The house belonged to the parents of Linda Torrez, and the elderly couple still lived there, as did Linda’s brother, but Linda’s husband, Eric, really ruled the roost. “I remember her telling Eric that we were kicked out of the homeless shelter,” Kristen says. “I remember her telling us we were going to stay there and to do what we were told.”

And for twelve long years, Kristen did.

In the fall of 1996, the twins moved into the front room of the ramshackle house, a stark contrast to the other brick bungalows and two-story Victorians on the block. At first the Torrez family was “kind of nice,” Kristen says. “I didn’t really talk to them; I’ve always been a shy person. But Will was outgoing. He talked. I remember him playing video games with Eric’s oldest son.”

There were two other Torrez children: a girl a couple of years older than the twins, and Patrick, just a year older.

The twins enrolled at nearby Brown Elementary School. Kristen didn’t talk much there, either; she stayed in the shadows. But Will was acting out. When Will was suspended after a fight, Eric got mad that he hadn’t beaten up the other kid. He made Will stand in the corner

continued on page 16

KRISTEN STILLMAN PUTS HER FAMILY FIRST. AND THAT’S WHY SHE’S LETTING HER FOUR KIDS GO.

By Patricia Calhoun
Kristen
continued from page 15

with a backpack full of sand. He shaved Will’s
head. “When I came home, Will was bald, and
I started crying,” Kristen remembers. “I didn’t
understand what was going on.”

What was going on soon got worse. Will
had bruises all over his arms. Eric
told the teachers that Will was
pinching himself for attention. But
Eric was beating Will, and around
Christmas, he started beating
Kristen. Sometimes he beat his
own kids. “Linda’s mom would
thwart to call the cops,” Kristen
says, “but Eric would just abuse us
more when she said something.
That’s why she left.” Linda’s father
stayed — Eric hit him, too.

The twins’ mother would occasi-
onally stop by. They begged
her to take them away. She didn’t.
“I would read all the time
when I was in school,” Kristen
says. There were no books at home;
and Will weren’t even allowed
to do their homework there. They
weren’t allowed to have friends
over, either; they just had each
other. As she read, Kristen was
looking for a story about a girl who
was going through what she was,
“a true story. If I had found it, I
know I could have looked at my
life differently.” She never found
that story, and so she had no other
way to look at her life. It was just
what it was. There was no escape.

No escape from the work that
Eric — who bought abandoned stor-
age units, then sorted and sold their
contents — had them do, digging
through the strange, sometimes
toxic hauls that littered the yard
and kept neighbors far away. No
escape from the strange exercises he had
them do, to make them strong. “It
was soldier training,” Kristen says.
“We’d have to do push-ups and run
in place, and stand on rocks and
nails for hours. I remember being
in the push-up position for 24 hours
once. If I dropped to my knees, I was
whipped with a bamboo cane.”
Eric would handcuff Will, hang him
from a chain in the basement. Once
he put him in an open sewage pit in
the back yard for days. Karen, who
was visiting him, turned the hose
on him and laughed.

Will kept telling people what
was happening to them in that
house, but no one seemed to care.
“Will, he told a lot of people,” Kris-
ten says. “I gave up.” Instead of
talking, she started cutting herself,
and beneath the tattoos, her arms
still bear the scars of that outcry.

Kristen got her first period when she
was ten, and the Torrez family told her she
was “now a woman.” Patrick instructed
her in a new kind of exercise: sex, and he
told everyone at school that he and Kristen
were doing it.

When Kristen was twelve, right before
she started seventh grade, Eric raped her one
five months before I even knew,” she says.
She went to her mother’s house and begged
for help; Karen called Eric, and Kristen was
soon back at the house on Irving Street.

When the baby was born, everyone said
that Patrick was the father; Kristen didn’t
say anything. When she started ninth grade
at North High School, she stayed silent. “I
time, she knew what was happening. “I
was so embarrassed,” she says. “I didn’t
want to tell anybody.” She would stop by
the program that North had for pregnant
 teens and listen to the other girls talk, but
that was no help: “Everyone was so excited
about being pregnant.”

She packed her bags, put them on the
back porch. And then took them back inside.
“Where was I going to go?” she asks now.
“Eric was just going to lie about it, anyway.”

One day in January 2004, Eric and Linda
took Kristen to the Wellington E. Webb
building. Her mom was there, all dressed up.
“I thought she was getting married,” Kristen
says. But as it turned out, fifteen-year-old
Kristen was the one getting mar-
ried, to Patrick, and her mother
was giving the bride away, signing
the form that allowed a juvenile to
marry. “They told me to go up there
and sign that thing,” she remem-
ers. “I was signing my life away.”

At sixteen, with two children,
Kristen dropped out of school. “I
felt there was no hope,” she says.
“I felt like it was hopeless. I just
gave up.”

She helped a woman in the
neighborhood with her gardening,
but she didn’t tell her what was
happening at the house. She didn’t
tell anyone; it was unspeakable. She
didn’t talk about the nights when
Eric made her watch him have sex
with Linda, when he made Linda
watch him have sex with Kristen,
when he made Kristen give Linda
oral sex, when 300-pound Patrick
raped her in the hideous bathroom
with the mushrooms behind the
toilet and the hole in the bathtub.
Someone from the family was al-
ways with her, always watching
her.

Kristen got a job at Taco Bell
— Eric kept her paychecks — but
was soon pregnant again. She kept
working through that pregnancy, a
boy, and then another pregnancy.

It was while she was in the hos-
pital after giving birth to her second
son, in June 2008, that she heard
that her oldest daughter had been
abused — by Eric’s father, the man
they called Apple.

When she got back to the house
on Irving Street, she talked to her
five-year-old daughter and real-
ized it was true. “I begged Eric for
weeks, ‘Can I take her to the doc-
or, can I take her to the doctor?’”
Kristen remembers. “He wouldn’t
let me. So I figured we had to leave.”

She hadn’t been able to escape
for herself. But now, for the sake
of her children, she would do it.
Family first.

The escape took weeks of plan-
ning. Will, who had managed to
leave the house for a job in Byers,
came back when Kristen posted on
MySpace that things were re-
ally bad with Eric. Kristen started
secretly packing the kids’ clothes
and found some paychecks that
Eric had stashed. Will and his girlfriend,
Megan, used the money to buy a car. And
then one day in early September 2008, when
Kristen told Eric she was taking all the kids
to back-to-school night, they got in the car
and drove to Kansas.

They lived first at a shelter, then in a trailer
in Paola. While Will’s girlfriend watched the
kids. Kristen got a job at Taco Bell.

She thinks that might be how Patrick and Eric tracked them down. In late October, Patrick went to the Denver courthouse and filed for divorce from Kristen — and also requested an emergency hearing to get custody of the kids. “Father has the support of his parents and he lives with his parents... Father has been the stay-at-home parent since January 2008,” reads the order that the court granted. Patrick and Eric drove to Kansas, showed the order to the cops there, then went to where the family was living and grabbed the four children. They took them back to Denver on November 7, 2008.

And then, finally, Kristen called the child-abuse hotline. The next day, she, Will and Megan drove back to Denver — and Kristen and Will went straight to the Denver Police Department. It was time to speak up.

Detective Phil Stanford wound up talking with the twins. The interview stretched over two days. “The first day, he thought I was nuts,” Kristen remembers. “I had no emotions. I was like an empty soul. On the second day, he started to believe.”

And then Stanford and another officer went to Irving Street, which they found “uninhabitable and unsafe for any child due to exposed wiring, open flames coming from the stovetop.” They placed a protective hold on all four children, taking them out of the house and putting them in the hands of the Department of Human Services on November 10.

The next day, a therapist interviewed all of the children. The oldest girl definitely showed signs of having been abused and told the therapist about what Apple, the man she thought was her great-grandfather, had done to her. The second girl said that it “was not okay for people to lick your private parts.”

Apple — whose real name was Andres Torrez — was arrested on November 13 and charged with five counts of sexual assault. Eric, Linda and Patrick Torrez were arrested on November 17, 2008, and all charged with varying counts of sexual assault on a boy and a girl who had been left in their care by their mother. According to the arrest affidavit, the girl had first been raped by Eric Torrez when she was twelve, and “remembered Eric telling her that he should not be doing it, but he loved her and she was beautiful.”

Karen Stillman was arrested on November 26, after admitting to Stanford that the marriage between her daughter and Patrick was a “sham,” and that she was aware of the sexual abuse.

Kristen had told Stanford that she wasn’t sure whether Eric or Patrick had fathered her children; the police ordered DNA testing. But other than the question of the children’s paternity, everything that she and Will had told the officers quickly checked out.

While the DPD and the Denver District Attorney’s Office were investigating the crimes that had occurred on Irving Street, the Department of Human Services was trying to decide what to do with the youngest occupants of that house.

Already, it was finding evidence of how the department had failed to help Kristen and Will.

“Denver Department of Human Services has received several referrals,” a January 2009 memo noted, “beginning with a referral on December 12, 2002, which stated that Ms. Stillman was pregnant and living with ‘Uncle Eric,’ who is her legal guardian. The reporting party had concerns that Mr. Eric Torrez was the father of Ms. Stillman’s unborn child, due to the fact that he was ‘controlling and intrusive.’” This referral was unfounded for sex abuse as there was no disclosure of sex abuse.

“On January 16, 2003, the Department received another referral when Ms. Stillman gave birth... The referral alleged ‘appropriate behavior’ between Ms. Stillman and Mr. Eric Torrez during the delivery due to the way Mr. Torrez was touching Ms. Stillman. The allegations were unfounded as there was no disclosure of sex abuse.

“On July 3, 2005, the department received another referral which stated that Ms. Stillman was ‘raped’ by her husband and that Ms. Stillman was not sure who the father was to her third child, with whom she was pregnant at the time. The allegations were unfounded and Ms. Stillman refused services.”

“On July 9, 2008, the Department received a referral alleging sexual abuse and domestic violence in the home. Ms. Stillman, who was living in the Torrez home at the time, reported that her husband Patrick was the father of her four children and denied allegations that her children were not fathered by Mr. Patrick Torrez. The children did not make any outcries of abuse, therefore the allegations were unfounded.”

Kristen remembers Eric and Linda coaching her about how to talk to the social workers who occasionally stopped by; the city officials who came by the house to check out zoning violations. Usually Eric and Linda stayed in the room when Kristen talked to anyone — social workers, cops, the doctors and nurses at the hospitals where she gave birth. And when they weren’t there, their threats were always hanging in the air.

“These people — they should have won some kind of medal for how they can lie,” Kristen says. “I’d even believe them, and I know it’s a lie.”

When DNA testing showed that Eric was the father of all four children, Patrick no longer had a claim to them. Although Eric and Linda continued on page 18
Kristen continued from page 17

experience being an adult,” she says. “I didn’t have much experience other than work. The only thing I learned with Eric was to be a hard worker. That’s what I did.”

Back from Kansas, at first she lived in a homeless shelter, then with a paternal aunt — “My father doesn’t want to meet us,” she says — and then found a place with Will that had room for the kids. She wanted to create a home for her children, even though she’d never had a real home herself. “Although she knows it will be a challenge to parent four children, she has stated that she is ready to do it, and feels she has the tools and support to be successful,” a July 2009 Human Services evaluation notes.

Kristen was overly optimistic. She got the boys back, then the girls. Four kids under the age of seven: It was too much. In September 2009, “it was decided that all four children would be placed back into foster care,” Human Services reports. “Ms. Stillman expressed being overwhelmed, and feeling like she could not take care of all four children at that time.”

And she had plenty to feel overwhelmed about. The girl who wouldn’t talk was now going to be the star witness at the January 2010 jury trial that Eric Torrez had demanded.

The courthouse was crazy that week: the trial of Willie Clark for the murder of Bronco Darrent Williams was going on, and the media was all over that. But they missed the drama unfolding right next door, which amazed court officials. The door, which amazed court officials. The national news was still full of the story of Jaycee Dugard, the California girl who’d been kidnapped by Phillip Garrido, then hidden in his yard for years, while she gave birth to two children. Kristen’s story was even more spectacular — and it had happened in our own back yard.

Kristen was on the witness stand for two days, telling all the horrible stories she’d first told Phil Stanford, the unspeakable stories that had turned out to be all too true. “I felt like passing out,” she remembers. “I’m not good at public speaking.” But if she did, Eric would win again.

In the middle of the trial, Eric Torrez suddenly decided to plead guilty: to five counts of sexual assault on a child, eight counts of sexual assault on a child by a person in a position of trust, two counts of sexual assault on a child, pattern of abuse, one count of sexual assault and one count of sexual assault, position of trust — pattern of abuse. (Other charges against him, involving an alleged assault on another child in the neighborhood, had already been dropped because of the statute of limitations.)

After Eric pleaded, Linda Torrez pleaded guilty to sexual assault on a child by a person in a position of trust; she was later given an indeterminate-to-life probation sentence with a minimum of twenty years.

Andres Torrez, who was really the grandfather, not the great-grandfather, of the girl he’d abused, had died in jail.

Patrick Torrez had already pleaded guilty in October 2009 to second-degree assault and contributing to the delinquency of a minor; he is now a registered sex offender sentenced to an eight-year program. “It is likely that Mr. Patrick Torrez has been a victim of some type of abuse or neglect by his father Eric, or his grandfather Andres, based on the severity of his father’s and grandfather’s offenses against other children,” reads one Human Services report.

Karen Stillman had pleaded guilty in November 2009 to child abuse resulting in serious bodily injury, and had already started a sixteen-year prison term. “She completely lost it in jail,” Kristen says. “It made me sad to hear her only concern was her cats, not her kids. Not even an ‘I’m sorry.’”

Eric Torrez never said he was sorry, either. On May 13, 2010, he was sentenced to the maximum prison sentence possible: Three hundred years in the Colorado Department of Corrections. Will and Kristen Stillman both spoke at the sentencing hearing; so did Detective Stanford. As he handed down the sentence, Denver District Court Judge Ken Laff said he hoped that Torrez
would spend the rest of his life in prison for what he had done to his victims.

For months, Kristen juggled her schedule of work, counseling, appointments with investigators and visitations with her children, who had lived together and apart, moving through several foster homes. The girls would ask about their father; Kristen has told them just that he’s in jail. “I don’t talk bad about him. He never hurt them physically,” she says. But she did tell her oldest daughter that she doesn’t like him. “That’s all they know.”

It hurt to see her kids, to have them ask when they were going home. “I thought I could handle this a lot better,” Kristen admits. “I feel bad when I haven’t seen my kids, but I feel bad when I see them. It hurts too much. It’s easier not to see them.”

Finally, she realized that she would have to give up her children permanently, voluntarily relinquishing all parental rights, if they were ever to get the help they need, have a real family. “Realistically, me taking care of four children—that’s crazy,” she says, clasping her hands.

Family first.

On September 14, there’s a hearing scheduled in Denver Juvenile Court to permanently revoke Kristen’s parental rights. But she’ll have plenty to remember her children by, including big bills. Denver County has been charging her for their foster care, citing this language in the state statute: “The county department or designee shall collect a fee from the legally responsible custodial parent(s). All fees must be established using the Colorado child support guidelines to determine the amount to be ordered. County staff shall not deviate from the guidelines.”

Eric Torrez is not paying child support, because he is in prison for life. His parental rights were terminated—but he is appealing.

There’s an appeal process for her child-support bills, too; Kristen hasn’t explored that yet. But then, she hasn’t had much luck going through official channels. “It makes me mad when I think how we told people and social services didn’t do anything. We could have been out of Eric’s house. I don’t understand how no one saw.”

The foster-care bill isn’t the only one Kristen thinks about. She still has hospital bills for the births of her children. This woman who endured unspeakable horrors worries about her credit rating, the minutes left on her cell phone. She writes down all of her appointments in a notebook covered with notes in colored ink. She has trouble making many of those appointments. She gets distracted. She recently lost her bus pass.

She asked a guy at the bus stop for change, and he gave her two dollars. “I had a half hour to wait, so I talked to him,” Kristen says.

“Denver Department of Human Services has received several referrals, beginning with a referral on December 12, 2002.”

“He told me that he was going to kill himself because he was going to jail for three years for driving under the influence. He felt there was nothing left to live for. He was serious. I told him every life is worth living, and yours is, too. He told me no one cared about him. I told him, I care about you. How do you think I’d feel if I heard you were gone? He told me I was his guardian angel—that made me feel good.”

Kristen helps out an elderly woman who lives across the street; she calls Kristen her guardian angel, too.

Back in 2009, Kristen had a set of angel’s wings tattooed on her back. “I feel like I’ve earned my wings,” she says. The “family first” tattoos were inspired by one of Will’s T-shirts.

Kristen thinks maybe she was meant to survive so that she could tell her story and help other people. “That’s what I think my story will do,” she says. “I’m sure it will help lots of people. I know there are more people living a life like me, and they’re not going to say something…if they don’t kill themselves.”

Kristen tried to kill herself when she was twelve, cutting and starving herself. “I thought the people I was living with would do it for me,” she told a therapist. “This would have been a blessing.” But now she’s glad she didn’t succeed in her suicide attempts, glad that she survived the Torrez house. She knows she has so much left to live for.

She has a boyfriend, her first. “I was afraid of love,” she says. She met him when he was dating her best friend: “That’s not a story to tell our kids.”

And, yes, Kristen is pregnant again. “I went to the doctor, told her I had four kids, and she looked at me like I was an idiot,” she says. “People look at me like I’m so bad.” She will be 23 next month.

Somehow between pregnancies, Kristen got her GED. She’s now enrolled at Metro State College, taking all kinds of classes, spreading her wings. “I thought I was nothing. Now I’m a college student. I want to succeed so bad. I know I will. I just want to do everything. I want to change the world. Or at least some of the world."

Kristen recently looked at her grades for her summer classes. She got a B in public speaking.

E-mail patricia.calhoun@westword.com.
Kristen Stillman wants the best for her four children. And so she lets them go.

By PATRICIA CALHOUN

Kristen Stillman does not cry. The tears were beaten out of her early on—as was any hope that someone might listen to her, rescue her, during those twelve hellacious years she was held prisoner at the house in northwest Denver where her mother had left Kristen and her twin, Will, when they were only eight years old. The only way to survive was to feel nothing, to be like “a zombie” as she endured the beatings and rapes that resulted in four pregnancies before she was twenty.

Kristen finally let herself feel when she was in the hospital after giving birth to her fourth child, a boy, and learned that her oldest child, a girl of five, had been abused by the elderly father of her rapist, Eric Torrez. Then, finally, she realized that she would have to rescue herself—for the sake of her children.

Two years ago this month, she and her brother fled to Kansas with the children, starting a harrowing journey for justice that isn’t over yet. Eric and his son, Patrick, soon found Will and Kristen; they took the children back to 2514 Irving Street with the blessing of the Denver County Court, since Patrick was married to Kristen. Eric had arranged that wedding when Kristen was fifteen, to explain away her pregnancies. But Kristen didn’t give up: She and her brother followed the Torrezes back to Denver and were soon pouring out their story to a detective who discovered that every detail was all too true. The Denver Police Department took the four children out of that house of horrors and put them under the protection of the Denver Department of Human Services.

The agency that had not been able to protect Kristen and Will Stillman.

For the sake of her children, Kristen Stillman kept her September 14 date at Denver Juvenile Court, in the shiny new justice center. After listening to Judge Brett Woods describe what it would mean to voluntarily terminate her parental rights—a decision that no longer have the right to decide on the education of their children or their religion; she would “no longer have the right to be the mother of these children,” or to contest the termination (as Eric Torrez, whose denial of paternity was disproved by DNA testing and whose rights were involuntarily relinquished, is doing—even though he’s in jail for the next 300 years)—Kristen confirmed that she had chosen to give up her children.

And then she cried.

Kristen wasn’t the only one grabbing for a tissue. “This is in the children’s best interests,” said the guardian ad litem assigned to represent them. “But it’s one of the greatest acts of love I’ve seen.”

“I would echo that times ten,” affirmed the judge.

The court readily agreed to Kristen’s request for a last meeting with her children, for a “goodbye party.” After that, they will be adopted. Homes have already been found for the boys and one of the girls, the kind of home that Kristen knows she could not provide for her children. And she tried. Even as first Andres Torrez, who’d assaulted her daughter, and then Eric and Patrick and Eric’s wife, Linda, and finally Karen Stillman, the mother of the twins, were arrested and pulled into the legal system, Kristen worked to win her children back. For a brief time in the summer of 2009, she had all four to herself—but it was too much. That September, she relinquished them back to the Department of Human Services and foster care. And now she has relinquished them altogether.

But she’ll keep memories of the children—how attached the girls were to her, how the little boys loved to cuddle. And she’ll have something more tangible: a big bill from the Family Support Registry for their time in foster care. The most recent bill caught up with Kristen just before her court appearance, and a payment was due the next day. She is now $4,979 in arrears, and there’s still one more bill coming, one that will include fees through September 14—when she officially was declared no longer a parent.

“Denver Human Services is sympathetic to the long-term ramifications past abuse has on parents who were themselves victims,” says a statement prepared by the Department of Human Services. “However, our highest priority must remain the best interest of the children and the system they rely on to keep them safe from abuse. Parental fees are an important form of support for children who need foster care. When there are extenuating circumstances, the courts can and often do grant deviations from the statutorily established fees; DHS supports the court’s process and will consider what course of action will best serve the minor children in our care.”

The state sets the rules regarding reimbursement. “From a variety of perspectives, the department is examining our options,” says Liz McDonough, spokeswoman for the Colorado Department of Human Services, which controls the appeals process.

Chris Moots, the director of Denver’s Human Services legal section, sat in on Kristen’s hearing. Her bill “is not nearly the number it could be...it’s very low,” he notes. The $50 monthly payment schedule is the same amount they might charge someone in prison, he says.

For Kristen, though, this bill feels like a prison sentence, punishment before she can move on with life. If she were not in arrears, she still would have her driver’s license that was suspended because of outstanding child-support bills, might still have the job she lost when she could no longer get to it. She understands the care her children have gotten, appreciates the care her children have gotten. But if the Department of Human Services had taken care of her, there would be no foster-care fees.

She feels strongly about this, so strongly that even if she had the money she would not pay the bill, and she does not want other people—the people who’ve flooded Westword with offers to help Kristen since she told her story in “Spreading Her Wings”—to pay it, either.

On the top of the bill from the Family Support Registry is this slogan: “Because Kids Matter Most.”

It’s enough to make you cry.

E-mail patricia.calhoun@westword.com.

House of Horrors

Some people want to give money to Kristen Stillman. Others want to set up a nursery for the child she’s expecting, or write letters to the governor asking for her child-support bill to be forgiven. A few past and present residents of the 2500 block of Irving Street would like to create a living memorial to her courage.

Richard and Dee Sena had owned the little house at 2514 Irving since 1950. They raised their family there and were familiar figures in the community. But after daughter Linda moved back in with her husband, Eric Torrez, people didn’t see the Senas that much. One day, Dee moved out altogether. And Richard, who’d liked to sit on the front porch and greet neighbors, suddenly stayed inside.

The house was looking worse and worse. When he wasn’t mooching off his in-laws, Eric Torrez would buy the contents of abandoned storage units and bring the junk back to Irving Street to sort. It soon filled the back yard and began spilling over into the front yard, then into the old cars parked on the street. Neighbors complained to the city about the smell, unsightly mess. At one point, then-Denver City Councilman Dennis Gallagher intervened to get help. "The back yard was a waste dump," he recalls. "It took a long time to get the place cleaned up."

But the hideous condition of the house hid an even more hideous secret: what was going on inside it. The neighbors who knew the twins were living there also knew that their mother had left them with the Torrezes, and even saw the woman occasionally. But they rarely saw Kristen, one neighbor remembers her surprise when she saw the young girl—Kristen was just fifteen—when she had her first child—pushing a stroller late one night.

None of the neighbors could get close enough to find out the truth. Eric Torrez was a bully who threatened them—they threatened some families so badly that they moved off the block to another neighborhood in northwest Denver, to a town in the mountains, to another state entirely. And now, with the bully locked up for 300 years and his wife and son facing prison if they violate the terms of their own probation as sex offenders, the neighbors wonder what they can do. They’d like to set up a fund for Kristen. They’ve even thought about buying the house where the twins were held prisoner, scraping it into oblivion and putting in a garden. They’d like to see something good grow there.
Kristen Stillman: Denver cancels foster-care bill for woman whose kids were fathered by rapist

By Patricia Calhoun
published: Fri., Oct. 22 2010 @ 6:48AM

The horrors that Kristen Stillman has endured in her short life are beyond imagining: abandoned at the age of eight by her mother, raped repeatedly by the man she was left with, bearing four children fathered by her rapist before she was twenty. And then the final injury, one far easier for most people to grasp: Denver County billed Kristen for the foster care of her children.

The children she would not have had if the Denver Department of Human Services had watched out for Kristen when she was a child.

By the time Kristen went to court on September 14 to relinquish her parental rights to those children -- so that they could be adopted and have the family life she never did -- the bill had topped $5,000.

When I first heard Kristen's story, it was difficult to grasp all that she had lived through. The foster-care tab from Denver County was not: Everyone can understand a billing error. And what else could billing a rape victim for the results of those rapes be? "There has to be some mistake," I told Kristen. "No matter whether you want to tell your story, I'll make some calls and see if we can clear this up."

Turns out, the bill was not a mistake: Denver County was just following the rules handed down by the state's Department of Human Services when it billed Kristen for the care of her children, who had been snatched by her rapist when Kristen finally fled to Kansas with the kids, put in foster care, then briefly returned to Kristen before she realized she could not care and provide for four children under the age of seven.

Too bad the county hadn't followed its rules years before, when people warned the department that something funny was happening in the house on Irving Street where Kristen lived.

Kristen did decide to tell her story, in hopes that the next little girl who's being abused feels empowered to tell her story -- in hopes that the next time someone hears from a little girl in trouble, they take action. Kristen Stillman's story, our cover on September 9 inspired hundreds of people to ask what they could do to help.

And it also, finally, inspired Denver County to do the right thing. After the state determined that it was entirely "up to the county's discretion" what it wanted to do with Kristen's bill -- and after many, many behind-the-scenes discussions -- the bill has been canceled. Yesterday, I learned that Kristen's case has been closed.

Her story is not over, of course. But now she finally dares to hope it might have a happy ending.

Showing 1 comments

Deborah McCoy 3 months ago

Kristen is a brave young woman whose life is just beginning following years of mistreatment. Patty Calhoun and a cast of many others have helped Kristen bring an unthinkable and horrific story to the forefront and get a bit of justice. Let the perpetrators rot and allow Kristen, her children, brother and any other victims move forward. Thanks to all who have brought this matter to light.