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FEATURED

Child neglect, abuse, drug culture overwhelm Idaho's foster system

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Sara Bloss talks on the phone with her husband, serving a prison sentence in Kuna, during a March 18 supervised visit with their 3-year-old son, Gus, at First Federal Bank Park in Twin Falls. Gus was placed in foster care while Bloss was in jail on a drug charge; she found a job, took an online parenting class and must finish a twice-weekly drug treatment program before Gus can return to her care.

TWIN FALLS — Robert Wayne Welch's girlfriend discovered something worrisome in 2014: His infant son was losing weight and vomiting. The baby's head appeared larger than normal, too.

Paranoid that his heavy methamphetamine use would be discovered, Welch didn't take baby Robert Welch Jr. to a hospital, prosecutors said later. But his girlfriend did.

Doctors in Boise found a fractured skull and a brain bleed. The infant appeared to suffer from shaken baby syndrome and was severely malnourished, getting only enough calories to keep his heart beating. He needed emergency surgery.

Welch would lose his parental rights and be sentenced for felony injury to a child. His son would suffer the consequences forever.

The boy is Josiah William Baker now — fostered, then adopted, by Jon and Tina Baker of Twin Falls, who picked up the 4-month-old from the hospital. Now 3 years old, he has permanent brain damage and developmental delays. He's non-verbal and can't be left alone.

For Josiah and other neglected, abused or abandoned children, Idaho needs a foster care system. But it's an overburdened system with a shortage of foster parents, overworked social workers, a lack of systemwide oversight and a culture “undercut by a constant feeling of crisis,” said a February report by the Legislature's Office of Performance Evaluations.

The need is especially pronounced in south-central Idaho, where far fewer foster placements are available than anywhere else in the state. And the number of children removed from their homes is on the rise.

Last year, 181 south-central Idaho children were removed — most due to neglect — compared with 161 in 2012, according to the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare.

Idaho legislators in March passed a resolution to create a committee to study Idaho's foster care system and recommend improvements. But as lawmakers debated more funding for child welfare and higher payments to foster parents, south-central Idaho still faced an extreme shortage of licensed foster parents.

And the need can't wait. A child removed from a dangerous situation needs a bed to sleep in that night. Food and clothing. A sense of security. Love.

Someone has to be willing to help.

'All kinds of drugs'

Baylee Brown was one of those children.

Hospitalized as a high school freshman, she was interviewed by child protection workers. Whatever they learned resulted in Baylee staying with a half-brother instead of returning home to her mother and stepfather.

"They did drugs continuously. All kinds of drugs," said Baylee, now a 17-year-old Buhl High School senior. "My stepdad was abusive — not toward me, but my little sister."

Baylee tried to protect her younger sister. Then, she said, her stepfather started directing the anger toward her. Baylee didn't want to elaborate.

In January 2014, the night "everything happened," family friend Brenda Hoover received a phone call from Health and Welfare asking if she could help.

Hoover had been friends with Baylee's mother and stepfather since they were teens and had known Baylee and her sister since their births.

"The kids all grew up calling me aunt Brenda," she said.

After that nighttime call, Hoover looked after Baylee's half-sister, now 6, under a 30-day safety plan from Health and Welfare. Baylee spent that time with her older half-brother, but he couldn't become a foster parent because he was only 20.

Hoover wasn't sure she was fit to be a foster parent. Toward the end of the 30-day plan, she said, "I threw my hands up in the air."

She prayed, asking God for direction.

The next day, Health and Welfare called, asking if Hoover could become both girls' foster mother. She took the Health and Welfare training, negotiated the difficult emotional waters and helped Baylee become a student athlete and a foster youth advocate.

And in October, after 2 1/2 years of fostering, Hoover became Baylee's legal guardian. Their relationship would be permanent.

'I wasn't a good parent'

Other parents with drug problems, like Sara Bloss, try to beat the drugs and reunite their families.

In a Plant Therapy warehouse smelling of lavender, citrus and peppermint, Bloss gave a cheerful "Hi!" and a wave to a co-worker sealing a package of essential oils March 13. Before starting her afternoon tasks, Bloss showed a photo taken with her husband that weekend — the first time she'd seen him in nine months. He wore a blue prison suit.

"He told me, 'When you talk to the reporter, you tell her it was all my fault,'" said Bloss, a 30-year-old Twin Falls mother with a 3-year-old son.

Bloss' husband violated his probation, was charged with felony possession of meth and is serving 2 1/2 years in prison in Kuna. In November, Bloss was charged with the same crime and sentenced to 30 days in jail. She left her son, Gus, with a friend.

But that friend got arrested after police found drugs in her vehicle, and Gus was put into foster care.

"It wasn't neglect," Bloss said. "Not all children are taken because of neglect."

Now Bloss has to prove to Health and Welfare that she deserves to have her son back, she said as she double-checked the essential oils inside a box headed for Canada and taped it up.

When her son entered foster care, Bloss didn't know where he was living. She was scared.

"You don't know who he's with because you are in jail," she said. "It was the most stressful 30 days of my life."

Then she met Gus' foster mother — Amanda Connors, who grew up in foster care in Twin Falls and Jerome — and her worries subsided.

"She's a young girl paying it forward," Bloss said. "I know he's in good hands with her."

Growing up, Connors bounced around different foster homes and group homes. Her father committed suicide when she was young. Her mother and stepfather used drugs; today, she has a good relationship with them, though they don't talk much.

Connors, 29, has fostered eight children and has four in her home now — including Gus, who ran over to Connors as she sat at the dining room table Feb. 13.

"Mom!" he yelled, clutching a bag of Skittles. Connors tried to refuse the yellow candy he pushed toward her mouth but eventually ate it.

"Ahh!" Connors said. "No more. Thank you."

Connors is glad to hear her foster children call her Mom. They must feel secure, she figures.

"It's pretty neat to watch the kids grow and feel safe," Connors said, "and see how happy they are when they see their family."

Of all the biological parents Connors works with, Bloss is the only one who consistently shows up for scheduled visits.

"I need to be there for my son," Bloss said. She wishes she could see him every day. "That just kills me."

But before Gus can return to her care, Bloss must complete a four-hour online parenting class, have a job and finish a twice-weekly drug treatment program at the Walker Center in Gooding. Bloss has the Plant Therapy job and completed the parenting class, but the third requirement remains. After work March 13, she planned to drive to Gooding for three hours of the drug treatment class.

Bloss is allowed supervised visits with Gus for an hour each week. Instead of doing it at a Health and Welfare office, they play at parks or JumpTime Idaho and get ice cream at Arctic Circle.

"I'm blessed we get to have those kinds of visits," Bloss said.

She often brings toys for the other foster children in Connors' home, so they don't feel left out.

Gus would start play therapy in mid-March. Bloss' social worker said Gus was having trouble expressing himself with words.

"It kind of confuses him," Bloss said. "Playing shows kids love."

Connors sends Bloss photos of Gus on the swings and the slides.

"He's at the park and it lets me know he's OK," Bloss said. "The foster mom is amazing. She's so cool."

With a court date approaching, Bloss hoped to get unsupervised visits with her son. And at the next court appearance, in June, she hopes the judge will let her have Gus back.

"My goal is to stay sober for the rest of my life," she said. "I wasn't a good parent before. I wasn't being the best mom I could be. My son needs me."

'How can you send them back?'

And what did the baby with a fractured skull need? Not what his biological dad could provide, a court concluded.

When doctors found infant Robert Welch Jr.'s skull fracture and brain bleed, Welch's ex-wife told police he'd blamed the injury on their two children jumping on the bed the infant lay on.

And, court documents say, she told police how Welch had replied when she confronted him: "Am I supposed to tell the cops that I beat the s— out of my own kid so they can put me in jail for the next 15 years?"

In February 2015, Welch was sentenced to a therapeutic program with the Idaho Department of Correction, known as a rider, and then to seven years of supervised probation starting in October 2015.

"I'm very sorry for the things I've done," Welch said at his sentencing hearing. "I realize I do have a problem. I love Junior more than anything. I pray for him every day."

During a brief phone interview March 20, Welch blamed the neglect on his heavy meth use.

"I was not a good person," Welch remembered. "I did my rider — pretty much six months of an intense in-patient program — and it changed my life for the better."

But he won't see the boy anytime soon. Welch gave up his parental rights in a child-protection case, and a plea agreement in his criminal case restricts Welch from seeing the boy until he's 16. The birth mother wasn't in the picture in 2014; she went to prison six days after giving birth for a parole violation on a forgery conviction, according to court records.

Willing to speak only briefly last month, Welch defended himself, pointing out he was convicted for neglecting to seek medical care, not for beating the infant; he said he still doesn't know how the baby's skull was fractured. He called losing Junior "heartbreaking" but said he's trying to put those events in his past.

Welch's conviction was for creating an environment that allowed his son to sustain a skull fracture or failing to seek treatment. A second count of felony injury to a child, dropped in the plea deal, said Welch failed to feed the baby.

The Bakers, already foster parents for other children, thought they would be providing hospice care during the baby's final days on Earth. But that was three years ago, and now the renamed Josiah is their adopted son. He's like an infant, but more demanding, Tina Baker said. He's "super smart" but yells if left alone.

On a Friday afternoon in mid-February, Tina pulled a photo off her refrigerator: Josiah as an infant, at the Boise hospital where they took him in.

About 45 foster children have come through the Bakers' doors since 2011. Six children live under their roof now: Jon's biological daughter, two foster children and three children the couple fostered then adopted.

"How can you send them back when you love on them?" Jon said.

Adopted daughter Chloe Baker, 4, carried a pink florescent balloon around the living room that afternoon and showed off her stuffed animal, Olaf from the Disney movie "Frozen." A 6-month-old foster girl napped in another room. On a kitchen chair, Josiah watched a video on an iPad.

Josiah was recovering from a procedure earlier that day at St. Luke's Magic Valley Medical Center, Tina said. Sedated, he received Botox injections — eight in his calves and two on the soles of his feet — to counteract the curling of his toes, a result of his brain injury.

Tina and her husband usually say yes to taking in foster children. But the night before Josiah's procedure, when they got a call about an 11-year-old girl who was suicidal, they were maxed out and said no.

"I didn't want an extra worry on my plate," said Tina, who was already stressed out.

Health and Welfare would have to find the girl a different home in Idaho's overburdened foster system.

How Idaho intervenes for endangered children

How Idaho intervenes for endangered children

About this series

Idaho's child welfare system is overwhelmed, with a shortage of foster parents, heavy caseloads for social workers and other widespread problems, state auditors concluded in February. And south-central Idaho has fewer foster family placement options than anywhere else in the state.

The *Times-News'* three-part series, beginning today, illuminates the needs and the system's flaws and points to potential solutions. Reporters Julie Wootton, Alex Riggins and Tetona Dunlap are collaborating to tell the story in a deeply personal way, through the eyes of the people with the most at stake.

Today: When children are neglected, abused or abandoned — why Idaho needs foster care.

April 23: Recruiting, training and retaining foster families — why there's a shortage.

May 14: How Idaho can improve its overloaded system, and what happens when children exit foster care.

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