

Tennessee Department of Children's Services in Tullahoma
by Jesse Ayers

Somewhere in the most far flung regions of rural Tennessee, there are two roads known as “Highway 40” within one mile of each other. In addition to having the same number, each of these highways answers to two other names which, according to road signs and maps, can all be used interchangeably. Much to my horror and disbelief, I discovered this charming quirk while scrutinizing my state road map for the thousandth time after getting lost for the thousand-and-first time. I was on my way to a DCS staff meeting, which one of the harried state attorneys had arbitrarily booked in a tiny, god-forsaken park an hour away from the office and absent from any of the maps I had sorted through. I had no gas, no money, and clueless directions which presupposed that I could only possibly encounter one Highway 40 en route. I was already an hour late, and would probably have given up and gone home had it not been for a message I received saying that everyone else would be at least forty-five minutes late.

This anecdote serves as a surprisingly accurate metaphor for the Tennessee Department of Children's Services: an under-funded body with inadequate resources frantically rushing to get to God-knows-where on a deadline, hindered by the ineptitude of the state government, all for the sake of doing what seems to be most ethical, if not entirely worth the agony, all a little behind schedule. The analogy could only be more perfect if legions of chemically-dependent possums had flung themselves furiously at my vehicle for the duration of my drive.

During my time at the Department of Children's Services, my duties oscillated between facing the terrifying specter of cruelty perpetrated against the innocent and withholding my frustration at the mundane pedantry of cubicle life. I took notes in juvenile court; drafted petitions for terminating parental rights; sat in on meetings between abusive parents and jaded social workers; and alphabetized every minute scrap of paper on a case manager's desk. I went on home visits to see what “Dependent-Neglected” households look like; spent countless hours trying by phone to herd attorneys, witnesses, and clients into the same courtroom at the same time; skimmed medical reports to determine whether a three-month-old could receive a broken femur and skull fracture from rolling off a couch; and interviewed case managers to find out just what “cruel and unusual disciplinary tactics” entail. I saw things that forced me to choke back laughter, heard things that made me physically ill, and read things that brought me to tears whenever I was finally alone and away from the office. In court, I met men and women whose daily lives would make Jeffrey Dahmer cringe. In the office, I saw dejected crusaders who would make Spiderman fall to his knees and cry that his whole existence was selfish in comparison. I couldn't even begin to describe the extent of my respect and admiration for the attorneys and case managers I have worked with.

Perhaps the most telling detail of my epic struggle to make the staff meeting is that I failed. I was a full two-hours late and missed most of the meeting. I left with the acute feeling that my morning, as well as every last penny I could scrounge up for gas money, had been wasted. A family service worker once half-jokingly said to me, “failure: that's what we're good at here.” But when I asked Attorney James Stephens why he would ever want to endure year after year of being relentlessly overworked, underpaid, overstressed, and verbally abused, he told me that this was the only kind of law he cared to practice because, at the end of the day, he still felt like he was working for the good guys.

The Tennessee Department of Children's Services is, at its best, inefficient, and at its worst, ineffective. The staff members are made to work through a dysfunctional bureaucracy with crippling restrictions. They take orders from distant executives who seem to lack sufficient understanding of the realities underlying state intervention in highly private, personal affairs. If I've gained anything of value from this internship, it's an insight into the complexities of “ethical action” in a bureaucratic nation in which we still cling to the false division between “domestic” and “public” spheres. The term “in the

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children's best interest" is thrown around a lot in Juvenile Court. Eighty percent of the time, no one knows what's really in a child's *best* interest. But it is my firm conviction that it's almost always safe to assume that a child living in a meth lab, being molested by the adults he depends on, or being starved by his own family could be better off elsewhere.