

Just released: *Lean In for Graduates*, a handbook for the next generation.

[Learn More](#)

Like 464k

[Shop Lean In](#)

[Sign In](#)

LEAN IN

[Inspiration](#)

[Education](#)

[Join a Circle](#)

[Books](#)

[About Us](#)

[MEET THE COMMUNITY](#)

[TAKING RISKS](#)

[JESSICA HOLDEN](#)



Jessica Holden

UG Representative, Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc.

Evanston, IL

[SHARE THIS STORY](#)

TELL US YOUR STORY

Good stories can inspire, teach and connect us. Please share a moment in your life when you "leaned in" or "leaned back."

[Add Your Story](#)

"I am a foster youth with the potential to do everything I dream of doing. And there are thousands more just like me."

"All foster children have problems."

That's what my first of three foster parents said to me when I was 10 years old. I had been living with her for two months when she took it upon herself to lay out the purpose and problems of my life. "You'll be lucky if you find a husband. All foster children have problems. You'll need to learn to cook and clean to make up for it, but your best bet will be to find a man and learn to keep him".

Her words cut me deep. They wrapped around me, keeping me from moving forward and reaching my true self.

So I hid.

Behind books, mainly. I threw myself into my schoolwork, my only refuge from reality. By the time I was 16, I was living in my third home. I still did not feel comfortable telling even my closest friends about my home life. I was too afraid of being labeled as a "lesser than." I had not yet found my voice.

That all changed when Kids Matter, an organization dedicated to helping kids reach their potential, invited me and other foster children to the Wisconsin State Capitol. We took the chance to speak to senators and representatives about providing more support for foster care. We shared our own personal journeys, goals and aspirations.

That's when something clicked inside me.

I went from hiding in shame to advocating for foster youth. I had not revealed this part of my life to my best friends — yet here I was, telling a room full of strangers, "I am a foster youth with the potential to do everything I dream of doing. And there are thousands more just like me."

I leaned in, and from that point forward I continued to find my voice. I stopped using my life as a foster kid as an excuse. Instead, I used it as a platform to do good. I realized that all foster children have a purpose. I have a purpose.

READ MORE STORIES



Garima Varma
GE
Communications
Leader



Naazish YarKhan
Content Strategist



Leslie Tolf
President, Union
Privilege.



Julie Thorne Engels
Founder/CEO of
Tribemint and
BettyVision



Beth Van Schaack
Law Professor &
Diplomat

I have a responsibility as a woman who managed to walk a different path to encourage others to tap into their own potential. I want others to discover what makes them happy and pursue it wholeheartedly. My mission is to live life by my own plan not one prewritten by a society that didn't understand me. My purpose is to help people whose dreams were tossed like yesterday's trash.

Madeleine Albright once said, "there is a special place in hell for women who don't help other women." I feel the same about people who overcome obstacles and never look back, leaving others in the same confusing maze. If we can, we should try to make someone else's journey easier. In the world of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc. — where I am now a national officer — we call that sisterhood.

My advice: Fine tune your voice early on. Like any instrument, the more you practice speaking up, the better you will be at sharing your story. The better you are at sharing your story, the better you will be at guiding others. Now I know that the world is my stage, and I will proudly perform my part. By doing so, I will inspire others to lean in to theirs too.

SHARE THIS STORY

About Us
 Overview
 Team
 Press
 Partners
 Contact

Community
 News + Inspiration
 Lean In Stories

Education
 Expert Lectures
 Lean In Book

Circles
 Lean In Circles
 Start a Circle
 Circle FAQs

Join Lean In

Lean In Today

Connect with Us:

Enter your email to receive updates

Subscribe

LeanIn.Org has updated its Terms of Service to clarify certain uses of User Content.

© Copyright 2014 LeanIn.Org •
[Terms of Service](#) • [Privacy Policy](#)



Abuse charges against Walworth County couple bring international attention

By Crocker Stephenson of the Journal Sentinel
Aug. 1, 2012

Town of Bloomfield - Last summer, while taking a walk, Lynne Marquette came upon a girl in front of a neighbor's home attempting to shove a dull push mower through a swath of thick, long grass.

Marquette was bewildered. She had lived in the vicinity for 39 years and she knew the couple that lived in the home - Martin and Kathleen O'Brien - owned a riding mower. Why, she wondered, would this child be out on such a blistering day attempting to accomplish what appeared to be an impossible task?

"She doesn't look at me. She doesn't smile. She doesn't wave," Marquette said this week.

"It just wasn't natural," she said. "I thought, 'Something isn't right.' "

A few weeks later, in early August 2011, child protective services took custody of five of the O'Briens' six adopted children - three of them siblings from Russia.

Another adopted child, a sister of the three Russian siblings, had been handed \$200 and told to leave the house when she turned 18, according to investigative reports.

The O'Briens were charged in May with 11 felony counts of child abuse and 12 misdemeanor counts of disorderly conduct involving their adopted children.

The allegations come at a delicate time.

On Monday, Russian President Vladimir Putin's office announced that he has ratified a long-awaited agreement with the United States that tightens the rules for U.S. citizens adopting Russian children.

"Not every international adoption ends happily," the office of Pavel Astakhov, Russia's children's rights commissioner, said in a statement. "According to official data only, 19 Russian children died at the hands of U.S. citizens over the last 10 years."

The O'Briens, who declined to comment for this story, have four biological children. According to a criminal complaint filed in May, they adopted six children beginning in 2004. The physical abuse charges involve three of the children: a Russian-born boy who is now 18, a Russian-born boy who is now 13 and an American-born boy who is now 14.

While these three children were, according to the complaint, beaten, stabbed, kicked in the groin, slapped and doused with pepper spray, it was the treatment that the adopted children experienced as a group that seem most cruel.

Court records paint a household divided into the biological family and the adopted children.

While executing a search warrant last summer, for example, investigators examined the bedroom used by two of the O'Briens' biological sons still living at home.

The room was messy, the closet overflowing and the floor cluttered with clothes. The room contained two flat screen televisions and several game systems.

The adopted boys were housed in another bedroom and the adopted girls in another. The rooms did not contain televisions or game systems. The closets and dressers contained few clothes.

Forced to stand naked

The 18-year-old told police that the O'Briens would make the six adopted kids stand naked on an enclosed back porch as the biological family ate dinner, the complaint says.

The O'Briens' oldest biological daughter told authorities that the adopted children were stripped and forced to stand naked in front of her and her siblings. The children said the parents made fun of them and told them they should go back to Russia.

The 18-year-old told authorities that the adopted kids often were hungry and punished differently than the biological children.

For example, he said, one of the adopted children was caught stealing food. Kathleen O'Brien threw several loaves of frozen bread on the floor and ordered all six adopted children to eat the bread before they could go to bed, the complaint says.

The 18-year-old told authorities that the children sometimes were punished by being forced to stand barefoot in the snow, by being locked together in a room for days at a time, by being forced to kneel on sharp rocks or by being told to stand in the sun in the dog pen among the dog feces.

The 18-year-old told authorities that the adopted children were not allowed to read books or go to school, that during the summer, while the O'Briens' biological children came and went as they pleased, the adopted children were not allowed into the house during the day, according to an investigative report.

One of the children said that when they were outside, they had to work. They were not allowed to use the family pool.

One of the children told authorities that Kathleen O'Brien would slap them across their faces as many times as their age. The children got to pick out which hand they were slapped with, the report says.

A child told authorities that if one adopted child broke a rule, all six were punished. In the winter, they would be given parts of the family's large driveway to shovel. If one child tried to help another child shovel an assigned spot, both would be forced to remove their shoes and socks and stand in the snow.

It is clear from the investigative reports that the O'Briens have had several contacts with Walworth County child protective services since 2008.

State law requires child welfare agencies to file a public notice when a child dies, suffers a serious injury or endures an egregious incident. The law also requires that the agency file a report within 90 days detailing what services the family was being provided, what contacts the agency had with the family, what reports the agency received regarding the family and when action was taken in response to those reports.

The Walworth County Department of Health and Human Services did not file an egregious incident report in the O'Brien case until the Journal Sentinel contacted the state Department of Children and Families, which ordered the county to do so.

While it has been almost a year since the children were removed from the O'Brien home, the county has yet to file the follow-up report required by law.

An official at the Department of Children and Families said state law precludes the agency from commenting on the case.

The repercussions

A Russian television network has been covering the early stages of the O'Brien case.

Boris Koltov, a Russian television reporter, told a local reporter that Russians cannot understand "why American families with children of their own adopt Russian children and then mistreat them."

Russia is a major source of adopted children in the U.S. It was the third-largest source of foreign adoption by Americans in 2011, trailing China and Ethiopia.

But Russian adoptions have slowed since April 2010, when an American adoptive mother sent her 7-year-old son to Russia with a one-way ticket and a letter that said he was violent, disruptive and she didn't want to be his mother anymore.

Some Russian officials called for a halt to all American adoptions. The adoption of Russian children by Americans became a political flash point.

While Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton signed an adoption agreement between the two nations last year, Putin's approval was pointedly slow in coming.

As for Marquette, who showed up at Walworth County Circuit Court on Tuesday for a minor hearing in the O'Brien case, the international ramifications are distant rumblings.

"These children lived nearby," she said.

"They were neighbors."

Journal Sentinel wire services contributed to this report.

Find this article at:

<http://www.jsonline.com/news/wisconsin/abuse-charges-against-walworth-couple-bring-international-attention-ec6aphu-164607916.html>

OLDER CAREGIVERS

In 2011 there were 5,529 caregivers over the age of 60. They were caring for 7,295 former wards and 1,900 children in adoptive or subsidized guardianship placements. Placed in the context of the entire universe of DCFS involved caregivers and children, the older caregiver population represents 28.5% of the total pool of 22,236 DCFS caregivers.

In FY 2010 several downstate cases involving older caregivers were referred to the Office of the Inspector General and revealed a need for a more comprehensive process to evaluate the long-term viability of some older caregiver cases. In one case, the agency was moving toward permanency of a 5 year-old child placed with his 85 year-old grandmother. The grandmother showed signs of confusion and would forget the child's medical appointments, the caregiver's open medications were in the child's room, there was an open child protection investigation, and the home was cockroach infested and littered with rotten food on the counters and in the refrigerator. In addition, there was no back-up plan in place in case the grandmother became unable to care for the child. Another case was moving toward an adoption of a substance exposed 16-month old child by a 70 and 73 year-old couple who were the adoptive parents of four other children ages 13 to 17. A 21 year-old relative was the designated back-up for the child. In a third case, maternal great grandparents ages 67 and 68 were the adoptive parents of their two great grandchildren, ages 7 and 8, and were preparing to adopt a 2 year-old great grandchild. The great grandfather was diagnosed with organic heart disease and the great grandmother had hypertension and Diabetes Mellitus. The relative identified for the back-up plan lived out of state. In March 2011, the Department revised Rule 302.40, *Department Service Goals* to include the Back-Up Caregiver Program (see Policy Transmittal 2011.07).

Previous trainings on older caregiver casework included use of the *60+ Checklist* and were last offered by Office of the Inspector General Project Initiative staff to adoption caseworkers and managers in FY 2007. The training stressed use of a "life-span approach" to permanency planning that included assessments of the older caregiver, the child and the back up plan regarding the long term stability of the adoption or guardianship. Borrowing from the work of Atul Gawande, OIG Project Initiative staff reviewed a sample of completed older caregiver checklists and discovered that a majority of the checklists were inaccurately completed and staff seemed not to understand the purpose of using a checklist to support thorough reviews of older caregiver cases.⁵ Gawande argues that many professions in the 21st century require highly trained and highly skilled staff to perform complex tasks. The ability to manage all of the steps required in these complex tasks is unmanageable; therefore, avoidable failures are common and persistent. He posited that a strategy is needed that builds on a worker's experience or lessons learned from the field, takes advantage of our knowledge and makes up for inevitable human failures, i.e. a checklist. The use of a checklist sets out minimum steps in a process, establishes a higher standard of baseline performance, and enhances the power of communication within a team. The Department's *60+ Checklist* was reviewed and revised with this argument in mind. Establishing a clear, easy to read and complete checklist that must be reviewed by the worker, the supervisor and the adoption liaison reduces the most common obstacle to effective teams, that being, as Gawande terms it, "silent disengagement" where specialized workers stick narrowly to their jobs and do not, as a team, assess whether the end results are satisfactory. Project Initiative staff revised the checklist making it easier to use and initiated training of adoption staff which is continuing into FY 2012. It is the expectation that the checklist will be given an official Child and Family Services form in FY 2012. (See attached *60+ Subsidy Checklist*)

Beginning in FY 2011 and continuing into FY 2012, OIG Project Initiative staff provided training to Cook Central staff, TASC and two private agencies.

⁵ *The Checklist Manifesto – How to Get Things Right* Atul Gawande 2009

60+ SUBSIDY CHECKLIST

Revised 10/2011

Child Information

1. Child name: _____ Male ___ Female ___ D.O.B. _____
2. Child I.D.: _____
3. Child's special needs: (specify all)

4. Child's contact with bio-family: (specify who, frequency)

5. Services currently in place for the child: _____
Counseling: _____
O.T.: _____
P.T.: _____
Respite: _____
Other: _____
6. Names/ages of others in home and their relationship to the child:

7. Child's collaterals: e.g. who does the child identify as important to the child (for children age 4 and older).

8. Hotline called in past 6 months: No ___ If Yes, ___ Unfounded ___ Indicated ___ Outcome:

9. Name of current GAL:

10. Does the GAL have concerns about caregiver or placement:

11. Date of last conversation with GAL: _____
(Must be within 6 months of date checklist is submitted for review.)

Placement Information

12. Current placement: Name _____
D.O.B. _____
Name _____
DOB _____
Address _____
Phone _____

Licensed _____ Unlicensed _____
Relative _____ Non-relative _____
Date of placement _____
CANTS/LEADS: Date: _____ Outcome _____

13. **Currently rent or own home:** _____ How long _____
14. **Home Safety Checklist (CFS 2025)** completed in accordance with Administrative Procedure #25?
____ (Unlicensed homes only)
Date completed _____

Caregiver Information

15. **Informal Supports:** Who comes into home to assist/support caregiver/s _____
Frequency of assistance: _____
Reason for Assistance: _____
N/A: _____

16. **Formal Supports:** Other agency/ies involved in home or with caregiver/s
Agency name _____
How involved _____
N/A _____

17. **Department on Aging** services in place or needed (1-800-252-8966):

For Caregiver/s: _____ Other Family Member: _____
Homemaker services: _____
Meals on Wheels: _____
Transportation Assistance: _____
Respite: _____
Other: _____

18. Caregiver health status:
a. **Caregiver #1:** _____
b. **Caregiver #2:** _____

19. **Received & reviewed medical evaluation form:** (Attach CFS 604)
a. Caregiver #1
Dated _____ from (Dr./Clinic) _____
b. Caregiver #2
Dated _____ from (Dr./Clinic) _____

20. **Household income: (not including child's stipend)**

Amount - Annual or monthly: _____
How verified: _____

Back-Up Caregiver Information

21. Caregiver participated in conference: in person _____ by telephone _____

22. Back-up caregiver:

Name(s): _____
D.O.B(s): _____
Address: _____
Phone: _____
Relationship to child: _____
Does child agree: (children 4 and older) _____

23. Date back-up identified: _____

24. Back-up currently involved with child: Yes _____ No _____

How: _____
Frequency: _____

25. Caseworker reviewed future role/responsibilities for child with back-up: Yes ___ No ___

26. Caseworker reviewed future circumstances of the caregiver that may require back-up to assume care of the child: _____

When: _____
Who else present: _____
Back-up prepared to assume future role: _____

27. Copy of authorization for background check for back-up care provider Yes ___ No ___
(Please complete CFS 718, *Authorization for Background Check*, and attach to this checklist)

28. Placement/Permanency Caseworker PRINT NAME

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Phone Number: _____

29. Placement/Permanency Supervisor PRINT NAME

Signature: _____ Date _____

Phone Number: _____

30. Agency or DCFS Region, Site and Field: _____

I have reviewed answers to each of the above questions.

- I have concerns regarding
 the living arrangement (e.g. housing, finances, health, safety, etc.)
 the back-up plan

AND I will ask the caseworker to

- (in Cook County) refer the family to the Child Protection Mediation Program or to Metropolitan Family Services - Older Caregiver Program;
- (in all other counties) confer with the supervisor for additional planning and/or services

Adoption Liaison /Coordinator PRINT NAME Date

Signature: _____

OR

I have reviewed answers to each of the above questions.

- I am satisfied that appropriate plans have been made for this child, including a back-up plan.

31. Adoption Liaison /Coordinator Date

Signature: _____

32. Adoption/Liaison Coordinator participated: by phone _____ in person _____

This checklist, to be completed by the caseworker, is REQUIRED for each child when the pre-guardianship or pre-adoptive caregiver(s) is (are) age 60 and older. The completed checklist will be reviewed in detail at the Child and Family Team Meeting in conjunction with the assigned Adoption Liaison/Coordinator (this may be done in conference or by phone) and a determination made as to whether additional permanency planning is necessary. If additional permanency planning is required, the family will be referred to the Child Protection Mediation Program (in Cook County), Metropolitan Family Services Older Caregiver Program (in Cook County), or to additional planning or services. If no additional permanency planning is required, the assigned DCFS Adoption Liaison/Coordinator signs the completed checklist reflecting agreement with the planning, and the original checklist will be maintained in EACH individual child's file.

Rev. 10/11



The staff and volunteers of KIDS MATTER INC. wish to say "Thank you!"
for supporting our team of *Champions for Children*.

RECENT HONORS

- | | |
|------|--|
| 2014 | Wisconsin Cares About Kids Award
Office of the Governor of Wisconsin and the Wisconsin State Public Defender's Office |
| 2014 | Pro Bono Attorney of the Year Award
State Bar of Wisconsin |
| 2013 | Champion of Victim's Rights Award (for support of child victims)
Office of the Wisconsin Attorney General and Wisconsin Department of Justice |
| 2013 | Black Excellence Award for Child Advocacy
Milwaukee Times |
| 2012 | Women in Law Award
Wisconsin Law Journal |
| 2012 | Wisconsin Victim Services Award
Wisconsin Department of Corrections (Office for Victim Services) |



SCOTT WALKER

OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR

GOVERNOR SCOTT WALKER PARTNERS WITH STATE PUBLIC DEFENDER'S OFFICE TO PRESENT THE WISCONSIN CARES ABOUT KIDS AWARD

Tuesday, February 18, 2014 - Press Release

Milwaukee – Governor Scott Walker and the Wisconsin State Public Defender's Office joined together today to present the *Wisconsin Cares About Kids Award* to Kids Matter, Inc. The award recognizes individuals and organizations throughout the state making a difference in their communities.

"A strong and prosperous state is a place where kids can learn and grow in safe and healthy environments," Governor Walker said. "I am proud to recognize Kids Matter, Inc., an organization of people who champion kids who otherwise may not have a voice. This organization saw a vulnerable, underserved population affected by crisis and stepped up to make a difference, offering children a brighter future and a better world."

Founded in 2001, Kids Matter, Inc. focuses on helping abused and neglected children with victims services. They work with foster parents and grandparents, who are taking over a parenting role, as well as facilitate connections between health care providers and child welfare professionals. Kids Matter also works to help particularly vulnerable youth with paid summer internships and job training.

The organization works extensively in Milwaukee, but also assists people in 68 of 72 counties.

Susan Corwell, Executive Director of Kids Matter, Inc., is a lawyer who got involved after she and her husband began fostering children. Sibylle Tasker, President of the Board of Directors, got involved thanks to her membership with the Junior League of Milwaukee. Kids Matter,

LEAN IN

News + Inspiration Education Start A Circle

MEET THE COMMUNITY FAVORITE READS JESSICA HOLDEN



Jessica Holden

UG Representative, Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc.

Evanston, IL

SHARE THIS STORY

"I am a foster youth with the potential to do everything I dream of doing. And there are thousands more just like me."

"All foster children have problems."

That's what my first of three foster parents said to me when I was 10 years old. I had been living with her for two months when she took it upon herself to lay out the purpose and problems of my life. "You'll be lucky if you find a husband. All foster children have problems. You'll need to learn to cook and clean to make up for it, but your best bet will be to find a man and learn to keep him".

Her words cut me deep. They wrapped around me, keeping me from moving forward and reaching my true self.

So I hid.

Behind books, mainly. I threw myself into my schoolwork, my only refuge from reality. By the time I was 16, I was living in my third home. I still did not feel comfortable telling even my closest friends about my home life. I was too afraid of being labeled as a "lesser than." I had not yet found my voice.

That all changed when Kids Matter, an organization dedicated to helping kids reach their potential, invited me and other foster children to the Wisconsin State Capitol. We took the chance to speak to senators and representatives about providing more support for foster care. We shared our own personal journeys, goals and aspirations.

and the Wisconsin State Public Defender's Office. It was first
tions working to make a difference in their individual

MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN JOURNAL SENTINEL

December 24, 2013

Watchdog Opinion Sports Business Food Entertainment Lifestyle Multimedia

Milwaukee County

Home News Milwaukee County

Volunteers put children and their families first at Christmas

This time of year, the offices at Kids Matter Inc. get a little hectic.

enlarge photo



Colton Matthews, James Perry, 12, and his family are receiving Christmas gifts thanks to Kids Matter.

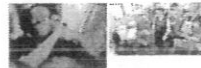
Mountains of presents, wrapped and festooned with ribbons, sit stacked on every surface. Handed visitors come and go, laden with gifts. One volunteer drives off with a vanful destined for foster children and their families throughout the Milwaukee area.

For 11 months a year, Susan Corwell and the crew at Kids Matter witness what seems to them an unending assault on the innocence of childhood. In December, with an army of volunteers, they do what they can to preserve that innocence — one child at a time.

"It's in awe of what they do there," said Paula Drangevic, the foster parent liaison at Children's Hospital of Wisconsin, whose family has fostered 30 children — and adopted six — over the years.

"We never want kids to think that Santa forgot them," said Drangevic, who helps distribute many of the gifts each year. "What's more important than for a child to know they are loved and remembered?"

more photos



At its core, that is the year-round mission at Kids Matter, a nonprofit founded in 2001 to serve the thousands of abused and neglected children thrust into the child welfare system or the open arms of family and friends willing to care for them, often at great sacrifice.

With a small staff and 250 volunteers, the group offers legal services, court-appointed special advocates and other measures to help caregiver families navigate a complex and often frustrating system.

"Because every child needs someone in their corner."