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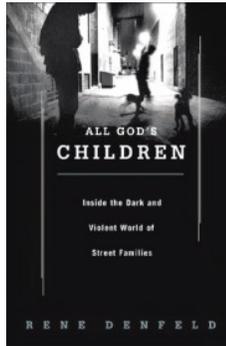
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Book excerpt

The Portland Tribune, Jan 26, 2007, Updated Jan 26, 2007 (5 Reader comments)

The following is an excerpt from "All God's Children: Inside the Dark and Violent World of Street Families" by Rene Denfeld.

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While the detectives spent a long day interviewing most of the accused, the Outside In youth agency held a memorial for Jessica Williams, as well as other "homeless" youth who die on the streets.

A year before, the agency had commissioned an artist to make a metal tree sculpture for the courtyard after another young street woman was murdered. The tree was now ready for dedication. The copper-colored leaves on the tree were blank. Every time a street youth died, his or her name would be inscribed on a leaf. The tree was expectant. There were at least a dozen leaves waiting for names. Jessica's was one of the first names inscribed.

The service was held in the courtyard of the agency's large building. Street kids and agency staff gathered around the death tree. It was exactly the sort of dramatic gesture that appealed to the street kids. For them, Jessica was now immortalized as a tragic symbol of how tough and dangerous their lifestyle was.

The Williams were not invited to the service. Becky says they were not asked for permission to have Jessica's death used in a shrine to murdered homeless youth. She felt it was their daughter they had lost, and yet the youth agencies had claimed her as one of their own, another Portland "street kid" thrown cruelly to the wolves.

"The streets are not a safe place for homeless youth, but, by far, the majority of homeless youth are good kids," Outside In Director Kathy Oliver told a reporter. "This is a tragedy and shouldn't be reflective of the homeless youth." She went on to claim such violence is "very rare."

It was a perspective repeated by other service providers. They all appeared to believe the murder of Jessica Williams was an aberration. In truth, they seemed more concerned with protecting the image of homeless

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youth than addressing the reality of street family violence, though the street families prey on the genuinely homeless youth time and again.

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Multnomah County Chief Deputy District Attorney Norm Frink had a different perspective. "The citizens are subsidizing an environment for these kids to take drugs and playact," he says. "We've enabled them to behave these ways."

THE BEE

Sherwood Gazette

Frink believes the agencies make it too easy for young people to live on the streets, allowing teenagers who have homes and parents to immerse themselves in a criminal subculture.

THE OREGONIAN CONNECTION

The result, he says, is a society of teenagers "playing cowboys and Indians on the street," only these youth are not supervised, and their games are bloody and real. "Some of these people could have been functional members of society," Frink says. "Danielle Cox, for example. She could have been a successful person. Crystal Grace was working in a jewelry store."

The Times

West Linn Tidings

In the weeks after the murder, a remarkable number of people blamed Becky and Sam Williams for what happened. "Where were you when your child was wandering the streets with her murderers?" asked one particularly vicious blogger. The writer stated the murder was "yet one more example of our 'nobody's home' syndrome at work."

Other writers were equally condemning. "I blame this girl's death in large part on those parents," one wrote. "Since she was so like a child why weren't they protecting her like a child?"

Articles in the media mentioned Jessica's fetal alcohol syndrome without mentioning that she was adopted, leading the reader to assume Becky was the alcoholic mother who drank while pregnant. Angry readers called the Williams house to yell at Becky, blaming her for Jessica's disability and murder.

Chuck Currie, an advocate who served on the board of the National Coalition for the Homeless, wrote an article titled "Jessica Williams Did Not Have to Die," which implied Jessica had been forced out on the streets by her family. "The only way to truly bring justice to the death of Jessica Kate Williams would be to make sure no young person be forced out onto the streets where she can be killed," Currie concluded. An opinion piece in The Oregonian claimed Jessica's murder was the result of lack of funding to youth shelters, and suggested donations.

Everyone had a finger to point. The agencies blamed the parents. The district attorney blamed the agencies. Some of the parents blamed each other.

And everyone together blamed James Daniel Nelson, who was portrayed as a charismatic Manson-like leader who turned a dozen youth into his mind-zombies and then ordered them to kill a developmentally disabled woman, all in less than two months since his release from prison.

No one examined the culture of street families.

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