

Los Angeles

The Rise of Vertical L.A.

APARTMENT LIVING



**The
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FROM
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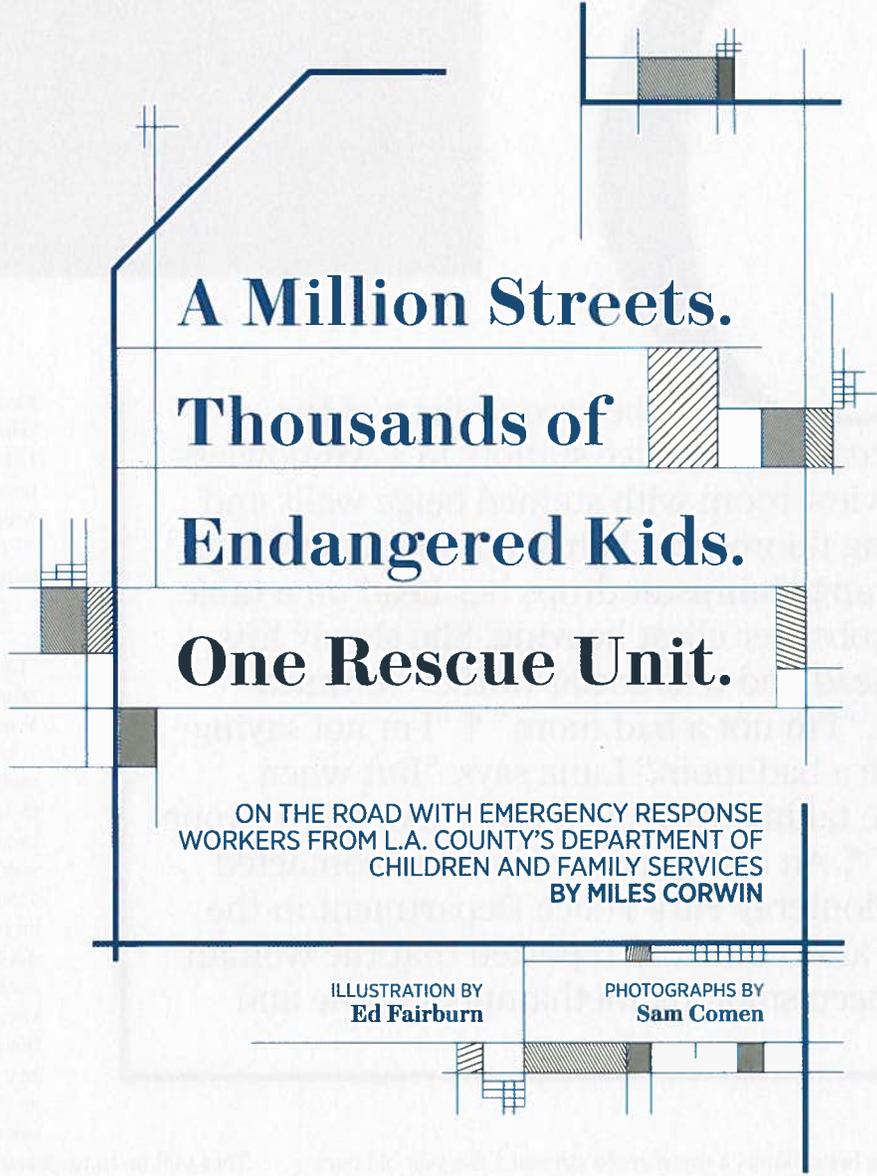
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A Million Streets. Thousands of Endangered Kids. One Rescue Unit.

ON THE ROAD WITH EMERGENCY RESPONSE
WORKERS FROM L.A. COUNTY'S DEPARTMENT OF
CHILDREN AND FAMILY SERVICES
BY MILES CORWIN

ILLUSTRATION BY
Ed Fairburn

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
Sam Comen



On the second floor of the Monterey Park police station, in a windowless interview room with stained beige walls and glaring fluorescent lights, an inmate wearing an orange jumpsuit drops her head on a table and sobs, her chest heaving. She slowly lifts her head and tells social worker Veronica Luna, “I’m not a bad mom.” ¶ “I’m not saying you’re a bad mom,” Luna says. “But when you’re taking drugs, you can’t take care of your kids.” ¶ An anonymous caller had contacted the Monterey Park Police Department in the early afternoon and reported that the woman had been smoking methamphetamine and

neglecting her children, a five-year-old girl and a two-year-old boy. When the officers arrived, they arrested her for being under the influence, transported the family to the police station, and contacted the Department of Children and Family Services hot line. As part of the Emergency Response unit, Luna was dispatched to the station. The emergency responders are the first to roll on a call and have 30 days to investigate a case. Once Luna completes her initial inquiries, she will transfer the file to a Continuing Services unit, where social workers conduct in-depth investigations and long-term monitoring.

The woman, who is young and attractive, with unblemished skin and clear eyes, does not look like a chronic meth user, but she does

have a tweaker’s jittery, garrulous manner. “Honest to God, I can’t even tell you why I smoked meth,” she chatters. “Maybe it’s boredom. It’s like a hobby. No, that’s not what I mean. I just don’t have a reason for it.”

Luna interrupts: “Is the children’s dad home when you use?”

The woman shakes her head no.

“I gotta be honest with you,” Luna says. “Your children are going to have to be detained from you. You’re under the influence. Your kids are not safe with you.”

After Luna obtains a list of relatives who might be able to assume temporary custody of the children, she enters the station’s break room. In the corner, beneath a television, the children are watching cartoons. The girl bounces a pink bear—a gift from an officer—on one knee. Luna, who is wearing black pants, a sleeveless black top, and sandals, smiles at them. “Did you guys eat?” she asks. The girl says that a police officer bought them lunch at McDonald’s. She and her brother hesitantly take Luna’s hands as she leads them to her car. The boy falls asleep a few minutes after they drive away.

They pull up to the Pasadena DCFS office, a bland, boxy eight-story building on Colorado Boulevard. Luna escorts the children to a glass-enclosed playroom filled with toys, then works the phones for several hours to locate a relative. She finally reaches the children’s paternal grandmother and runs a criminal background check on her. She arranges for the woman and her son, the children’s father, to pick them up.

Luna tells the father that he will have to submit to a drug test. He occasionally smokes marijuana, he says, but has never used hard drugs. He tells Luna he loves his wife. “She’s such a good lady, but she just has that one issue. I don’t know what to do.”

◀ **FIRST RESPONSE**
The ER unit's Veronica Luna had thought of social workers as cold bureaucrats

The father and grandmother follow Luna to the playroom. The boy is dozing again, and the girl, who is still playing with the pink bear, jumps to her feet and shouts, "Daddy!" He leans over and kisses her, and she wraps her arms around his neck.

Luna, 48, is thrilled when the children leave with their father and grandmother. She didn't have to subject them to a troubled foster care system, underfunded and overcrowded, where they might have endured further trauma by being split up. Yet Luna will never know the ultimate fate of the two, a protocol some ER workers find disturbing and others consoling.

THIS IS A bad time to be a child in Los Angeles County. According to a USC study released in 2014, DCFS investigations of alleged child abuse or neglect affect 14.6 percent of the county's children before they turn five. The staggering figure came on the heels of a 2013 case of torture and murder that rocked the agency. In the beating that killed him, eight-year-old Gabriel Fernandez of Palmdale suffered three broken ribs and a skull fracture. Two teeth were knocked out, BB pellets were embedded in his lungs and groin, and burns and bruises covered his body. Social workers had investigated a half dozen reports of abuse but allowed the boy to continue to live with his mother and her boyfriend. Sheriff's deputies had looked into four reports of abuse but did not inform DCFS. Pearl Fernandez and her boyfriend, Isauro Aguirre, were indicted by a grand jury on a charge of murder. They await trial and could face the death penalty if convicted.

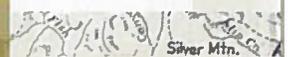
A blue ribbon commission on child abuse that was formed in the aftermath pointed to poor communication between DCFS, law enforcement, and other county departments and recommended that a new office be created to coordinate services. A county Office of Child Protection was created last year, and Michael Nash, the former presiding judge of the county's juvenile court, was recently named its director.

During a decade of covering crime for the *Los Angeles Times* and writing two books about homicide in L.A., I saw many parallels between social workers and police. They seemed to be the two most reviled professions in Southern California. The public usually hears about cops when they are involved in a shooting or use excessive force, and the only time people seem to think about social workers is after a gruesome child murder. In many of these high-profile cases, the social workers are culpable and deserve to lose their jobs. But the overwhelming majority of the more than 80,000 calls they investigate annually generate no controversy.

In writing about homicide, I became inured to the tragedy and trauma. The cases that would invade my sleep usually involved children. I recall the haunted eyes of a five-year-old boy, staring at a wall and clutching a Mickey Mouse blanket, who had been standing beside his father in an alley on South Broadway as the man was shot to death. When patrol officers arrived, he was crying, "I want my daddy." I recall a coroner's investigator digging out the body of an 11-pound baby, wrapped in three layers of plastic bags and a ragged blanket, from a trash can in an LAX parking lot. I remember the young mother who was shot to death, her six young children draped over the coffin at an Inglewood funeral home, sobbing.

I often wondered about these and other traumatized children I saw and the social workers who gathered them up and drove off into

◀ **TOY LAND**
The kids' playroom at the Pasadena office of DCFS



the distance. Many times I thought of writing about the demands on social workers and the tribulations of the children in their care. I believed it was important for the people of L.A. because they are the ones who ultimately finance the care of abused and neglected children. I was blocked from doing so because the child welfare system is closed to the public to protect the privacy of the young.

I petitioned the presiding judge of the Los Angeles County Juvenile Court, Michael Levanas, explaining that the public reads only the lurid headline version of social work. I wanted to provide a more nuanced, in-depth perspective. Levanas issued a court order granting me access to DCFS, with the proviso that I not identify any minors. I spent almost three months last summer in the Pasadena office, shadowing ER social workers, going out on calls, following them to jails and hospitals and living rooms, sitting in on interviews with parents and children. I was given a desk in the ER unit, and I spent every day in the office, waiting for a supervisor to notify me about a hot line call.

I found the ER unit a constant surprise: Workers never know what they'll discover after they knock on a door, not unlike cops. Some carry bug spray and douse their ankles before they enter a residence. One young social worker stepped into an apartment and faced a wall that appeared to be painted black. Then the wall began to move; every square inch was covered by cockroaches. While on a case another worker had the windows of her car punched out. Several have been threatened and assaulted.

Shadowing social workers was often more demanding psychically than following homicide detectives. With homicide detectives, the victim is gone and sometimes forgotten, as the chase for the killer commences. With social workers, the victim is everpresent.

EMERGENCY WORKER KIM Mittleman is dispatched to Huntington Memorial Hospital in Pasadena. A mother has tested positive for opiates, cocaine, and marijuana after giving birth to a baby who is three months premature. The infant suffers from severe respiratory problems and is on a ventilator and a feeding tube. Mittleman learns the mother has an extensive record of abusing and neglecting her children.

Mittleman enters the hospital room and interviews the mother, who is wearing paisley pajama bottoms and a blue hospital top. The conversation is casual until she asks, "Why were you using?"

The woman explains she was at a party and was handed a joint that must have been laced with cocaine and other drugs. She then launches into a rambling monologue: "I'm so tired of making mistakes and putting my children in jeopardy. I guess my baby will be here awhile, so I'll have time to get it together. God, why do I make these stupid mistakes?" She raises her palms and says, "I know God is on my side; he's in my corner. He told me it's going to be OK." Her eyes cloud with tears. "I've been through so much in my life."

She mentions several other DCFS social workers who have investigated her and asks Mittleman whether she knows them. She spends the next ten minutes chatting, trying to ingratiate herself with Mittleman and talking about her own problems; she never inquires about her baby. Finally she falls back onto the bed and stares at the ceiling. Mittleman asks about her four other children. She's been living in her car, she says, and hasn't been able to care for them. Two are with her mother, and two are with their father, who she says is also the father of the newborn.

Upon spotting the man in the hallway, Mittleman steps out of the

**QUICK
STUDY**

That she's on a case for just 30 days "keeps me sane," says Kim Mittleman



room. "I know you have the two boys at home," she says. "Do you have any other kids?"

"Yes," he says. "Nine."

The man, who lives in a converted garage apartment with the two children, has convictions for possessing and selling cocaine.

Mittleman and the father wander down the hall, searching for the neonatal ICU. Mittleman has seen numerous drug babies but is shocked at the sight of this infant. He is tiny, less than two pounds, and as he squirms in the incubator, under a warm blue light, possibly in pain, Mittleman mutters, "The poor little thing." If he survives, she says, his medical complications could be extensive.

Because of the woman's history with DCFS and her recent drug use, Mittleman plans to file a court order to place the baby with someone other than the mother when he is released from the hospital. The man identified as the father later demands a paternity test, but the case is transferred to another unit before Mittleman can hear the outcome.

Several other infants are born to drug-addicted mothers in the Pasadena area that month. One baby has a congenital heart problem and shows withdrawal symptoms such as constant shaking. Doctors give him methadone. When he doesn't respond because his addiction is so acute, the doctors are forced to administer morphine. The mother never comes for the baby, who remains at the hospital for treatment.

Mittleman goes to her office but cannot expunge the memory of the tiny baby in the incubator. The image prompts her to recall one of her most disturbing cases. A mother and her boyfriend living in a Pasadena apartment duct-taped her baby's mouth closed so he wouldn't cry and then taped his arms to his body so he wouldn't make noise. When they returned from getting high, they discovered he had suffocated. "I had to interview the mom," Mittleman says, "and I was crying the whole time." Another horrific case that happened on her watch involved a baby with 52 fractures, sustained over a period of months, who was not breathing when she arrived at the emergency room. Doctors suspected the mother had thrown the child against a wall.

Mittleman, who is 52, has a background that she believes helps her understand different cultures. Her father is Jewish, and her mother is African American. She grew up in an all-white Pasadena neighborhood and attended Howard University, a historically black college. Mittleman has been with DCFS for 18 years. Staff members who stay that long often become bitter or jaded. "It's easy to lose your moral compass," she says. "I try not to judge people. I treat janitors the same way I treat my colleagues. If a family doesn't have food, sometimes I'll pay for it out of my own money. But I don't want to work with families long-term; I don't want to raise a child. I get the greatest satisfaction from seeing a child in a scary situation, improving the situation or getting the child to a better situation, and then moving on. That's why I'm in ER. Getting in and getting out keeps me sane."

ONE OF 18 offices within DCFS, Pasadena's operation isn't as busy as the South L.A. or Lancaster units. But as a resident of Altadena, I know the region is one of the most diverse in the county. It ranges from impoverished enclaves in Cypress Park, El Sereno, and Northeast Los Angeles to middle-class neighborhoods in Glendale, Monterey

BLEND IN ▶

Jacob Sanchez started dressing down after being chased in one neighborhood



Park, Rosemead, and Alhambra to mansion-lined streets in San Marino and La Cañada Flintridge. The ethnic mix is eclectic and includes Armenians, Asians, Latinos, and Middle Easterners. While child abuse is usually the product of poverty, it can have cultural roots. Luna was recently sent to a spacious home in San Marino when a high school counselor called the DCFS hot line after talking to a troubled student. The boy, who is Asian, told Luna that he had been an A student, but his grades had begun to slip and he had ditched a few classes. When the father found out, he made him stand in the rain, nude, for several hours. Luna referred the case to the agency's Asian-Pacific unit so the family could receive counseling and supervision by a social worker who speaks their language.

Another worker had been dispatched to Bradbury, one of the most affluent cities in the county, after a middle school counselor called to report that a Middle Eastern man was abusing his two children. If the children received a grade less than an A, the father made them stand against a wall for hours, with books piled on their heads, and beat them on the feet with a stick. Following a visit from the social worker, the mother obtained custody of the children and moved in with family nearby. The father returned to Iraq.

ER workers are usually more experienced than those in other units, and the department counts on them to make decisions under great stress and pressing deadlines. In the past DCFS's unwritten philosophy was "detain or close," says Ed Webb, Luna's supervisor, who has been with the department for 25 years. If no abuse was found, the ER unit closed the case; if anything untoward was suspected, the social worker often removed the children from their homes. About a decade ago, he says, the department came to realize how deleterious foster care could be. Every effort was made to keep families together, including offering parents therapy and other services.

In the wake of the Gabriel Fernandez tragedy and other high-profile abuse cases, some social workers said they went back to the practice of removing more children from homes. In 2014, after 15 years of reductions in the number of (CONTINUED ON PAGE 216)



Marking Their Turf

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 215

Three years ago, when RadPad was in its initial stages of venture capital funding, Westside Rentals sued the start-up, alleging trademark infringement. According to the complaint, RadPad was falsely implying it had a partnership whereby landlords could post listings on Westside Rentals by using RadPad.

In a sense, the suit echoed the successful action Craigslist brought in 2012 against the likes of aggregators PadMapper and Lovely for using data robotically scraped from Craigslist by the company 3Taps. That suit ended in a court order last year, which compelled the start-ups to strip all Craigslist content from their databases and further prohibited the sites from “directly or indirectly downloading, harvesting, obtaining or copying Craigslist Content by any means whatsoever, including but not limited to robots, spiders, scrapers, or crawlers.”

Yes, in a digital age this is what the apartment listing wars have come to—a peaceful (or not) coexistence between database syndicators, old-guard sites, and the aggregators for whom inventory is a means to create the coolest way to find a place. Craigslist hasn’t sued Westside Rentals or RadPad, both of which absolutely jump on its ads like predators on prey, albeit more judiciously. Trying to keep up with who shared databases with whom, meanwhile, became confusing. Miller told me, for instance, that Westside Rentals shares data with the San Francisco-based Lovely, while Eppers said that last year Zillow and Trulia stopped allowing RadPad to syndicate listings from their services.

As for Westside Rentals, Eppers characterized the company’s lawsuit—which was eventually dropped—as pugnacious and clumsy. “This is how bad it got,” he said. “People at Westside Rentals that were staff members were listing apartments on RadPad, unbeknownst to the higher-ups, who were then suing us because those very listings were on RadPad. And when we presented the higher-ups with the very evidence that their underlings were putting their own listings on our service, these guys immediately dropped the lawsuit.”

Asked for Westside Rentals’ view, Miller demurred. “That stuff’s in the past,” he said. “They have a much different business model than us. We’re going down different paths.”

But are they? Because here’s one thing they both believe in: the good old lawn sign. “Lawn signs are a very, very effective marketing tool,” Eppers told the *Los Angeles Business Journal* last year, referring to his

canary yellow placards. “In L.A. and Chicago and D.C., those lawn signs have done wonders for us.”

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THOSE HAVE TO be fighting words to Westside Rentals.

Early one Sunday morning I met up with Kenny “Tex” Teixeira, a burly 48-year-old musician with a ponytail. At Westside Rentals he’s called a “solicitor,” but this is what he actually does: He cases neighborhoods at slow speeds, putting up signs and scouting the homemade FOR RENT ones that the company can use as leads, contacting landlords for permission to list the property.

Teixeira, a former housing inspector for a HUD subcontractor, has been placing Westside Rentals signs for 11 years. He’s never been on salary. The job, he told me, starts at \$3.50 per sign and \$1 per potential new listing spotted and passed on to a salesperson.

Just after 7 a.m., Teixeira was circumnavigating the West Hollywood/Hollywood area in his Dodge Caravan. His supplies were laid out in the hatch: a bunch of wooden stakes and a mallet, zip ties (to affix signs to properties without grass), signs in two sizes (Beverly Hills and West Hollywood have restrictions), and a plastic storage box filled with adhesive numbers for the text-this-to-that codes.

We trolled stretches of Sweetzer and Croft perennially dense with rentals, where the shade of blue on the street signs told Teixeira whether he was still in West Hollywood (which requires the smaller Westside Rentals lawn sign) or had officially crossed over to L.A. (bigger one). As we drove, Teixeira exhibited pride in his employer in a tone that indicated he believes there’s only one horse in this race, and he’s backing it.

“When you see RadPad signs now, you can tell they’ve been there for a while,” he said derisively. “If you see a Westside Rentals sign, it’s usually fresh and new.”

By the time we had neared Mid City, Teixeira was telling me about one of the first songs he sold to the movies, for a 1993 action thriller called *Firepower*, starring Chad McQueen. The bosses at Westside Rentals don’t pay for gas or mileage, Teixeira said, but they do give a cash bonus to whoever puts up the most signs in a given pay period. Teixeira allowed that he often wins. That weekend alone, while L.A. slept, he would hit 106 properties in two days. ■

Paul Brownfield’s most recent piece for Los Angeles, “What Can I Tell You?,” about his quest to better know his late father, appeared in the October 2015 issue.



DCFS

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 107

children placed in L.A. County foster care (from about 51,000 in 1998 to about 20,000 in 2013), the figures increased by almost a thousand. At roughly the same time the number of children in the county who died due to abuse or neglect dropped from 61 in 2013 to 32 the following year, still an appallingly high figure.

The DCFS caseloads are among the largest in the country, says David Green, treasurer of the social workers union. On average an L.A. County social worker handles about 27 cases, he says, while the recommended standard is 14. Every ER worker lives in fear that one of the children interviewed will end up like Gabriel Fernandez, Luna says. Some parents lie. Some parents coach their kids to lie. Some parents apply makeup to cover their children’s bruises. “Gabriel,” she says, “is everyone’s nightmare. This creates a level of stress that’s always there.”

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LUNA HAS DAUGHTERS, so the cases that can disturb her the most tend to involve the sexual abuse of young girls. She knows she is in for an emotionally tumultuous day when her supervisor calls her into his office and briefs her about a recent molestation call. According to the report, a 15-year-old girl finally revealed that the mother’s ex-boyfriend had sexually abused her several years before. The mother called the LAPD, who arrested the ex-boyfriend.

On a sweltering afternoon, Luna drives her minivan to an apartment north of downtown. The mother lets Luna into the cluttered living room. Family photos paper the walls, the windows are latticed with thick iron bars, and a fan in the corner blasts warm air. Luna sits on the sofa, and the mother drags a chair over to sit across from her. Her eyes are red, and her cheeks are streaked with mascara.

“The reason she brought it up now,” the mother says, “is because a friend of hers

recently went through a similar thing with her uncle. She got some therapy, and she told my daughter. That gave her the strength to tell me. She said, 'I've got to tell you now. It could happen to someone else.' She's been sleeping in my bed since she told me."

The mother, who says she recently broke up with the boyfriend, grabs a tissue and dabs at her eyes. "He pulled me in. He pulled all of us in. He needs to pay for this." She apologizes for sharing her own problems but says she's so consumed with anger at the boyfriend and remorse for her daughter that she needs to talk to someone. She drops her head and whispers, "I feel so guilty."

"You did the right thing after you found out," Luna says reassuringly.

"I told her, 'You're safe with me now, safe from that animal.' I reacted immediately. I got a restraining order and called the cops. They arrested him right away. He's in jail now."

Explaining that the girl must undergo an extensive forensic examination, Luna asks the mother to bring her daughter into the living room. The girl, who is dressed in shorts and a T-shirt, shuffles into the room, stares at her flip-flops, and collapses onto a chair, while her mother retreats to a back bedroom. "I want to say, first of all, you're not in any trouble and you're very brave," Luna says. "You're an amazing young woman to come forward and tell the truth. You did the right thing."

The girl nods, tears streaming down her face.

"After we talk, I'm going to ask you to see a doctor. They're professionals. They do this all the time. They'll ask you some probing questions. Are you ready for that?"

The girl wipes her eyes with the collar of her T-shirt and nods.

"Can you tell me what happened?" Luna asks softly.

"When I think of that day, my stomach turns. Everything comes back to me." The girl crosses her arms and begins to rock. "My mom was at work. He said, 'Let's play a game called 'pull my pants down.' He tried to take off my pants. I'd say, 'Stop!' but he'd say, 'It's just a game.' One time he carried me to my mom's room. He pulled down my pants. I said, 'Stop!' but he put his face there."

"Were you naked?"

"Yes. I started crying. He'd use his hand. I kept crying. He told me to shut up. After that, I don't remember anything. I just remember I was in pain."

"I know your mom feels bad," Luna says. "So maybe there's something you can tell me that you couldn't tell your mom. Has he done anything recently?"

PRESS PLAY

with MADELEINE BRAND



Join Madeleine Brand for a look at news, culture and emerging trends through the lens of Los Angeles.

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BLOOD ISN'T BLUE OR GRAY

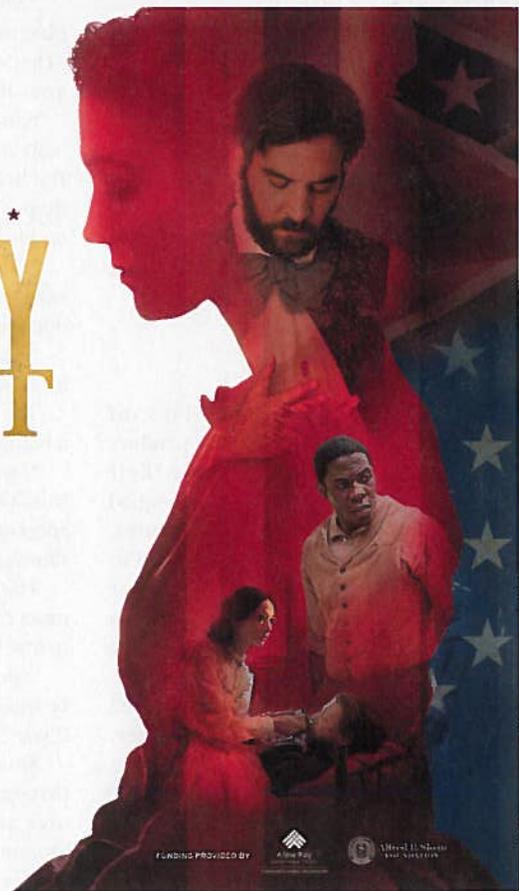
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She shakes her head no. "He told me if I said anything to my mom, something bad was going to happen. That's why I didn't say anything until now."

Luna asks a few more questions, but the girl is too distressed to elaborate. "We're going to get you help, some therapy," Luna says. "Then the healing will begin."

Down the street from the apartment, Luna lingers beside her car before driving back to the office. "When I get a case like this, sometimes I just go home and cry. It really gets to me. I feel for this girl. The poor kid—she couldn't even tell her mother."

Luna suspects the abuse continued for some time. Two weeks later her fears are confirmed by the results of the forensic exam, which reveals recent trauma. Given that the ex-boyfriend has been arrested and the mother has obtained a restraining order, Luna doesn't need to remove the child from the home.

Luna had been interested in social work since she majored in child development at Cal State L.A., but she heard social workers referred to as "baby snatchers"—cold, heartless bureaucrats who didn't care about children. After Luna taught kindergarten for several years and met some social workers who were called to the school, she concluded the stereotype was not true. She joined DCFS in 2009.

Luna was a rookie social worker when she had to remove two children—ages three and five—from their home in Duarte because the mother was a drug addict. The children were often found wandering on the street in the middle of the night. A year later she encountered the mother. "She hugged me," Luna recalls. "She'd got her kids back, and she was off drugs. She told me, 'If it wasn't for you, my kids would be dead.'"

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EVEN AFTER MONTHS of watching young children endure the turmoil of leaving their homes, being hustled into squad cars, and transported to police stations, I find the experience unsettling. I'm apprehensive on a warm, breezy day near the end of summer when I tag along with ER worker Jacob Sanchez, who is being dispatched to the Inglewood police station. A boy almost two years old has been treated at a local hospital for bruises to his face. His mother, who lives in Highland Park, was visiting her boyfriend and said the boy had fallen down some stairs. But the doctor who examined him said the bruises were not consistent with a fall.

Sanchez wore slacks, dress shoes, and a button-down shirt when he began working for the county eight years ago. One day three crackheads chased him in an attempt to rob him. Now he dresses in sneakers and jeans so he can blend into sketchy neighborhoods and make a quick getaway if he is in danger.

He enters a room that's decorated in stark contrast to the military atmosphere of the rest of the station. Toys and colorful blankets cover the plush carpeting, and a wall of cubbyholes offers a spot where children can store their belongings. Sanchez introduces himself to the 21-year-old mother. Her hair is unkempt and gathered into a loose bun, and she's wearing sweatpants and a T-shirt. Her son has plum-colored bruises on his forehead, cheekbones, chin, and beside his ears. The three parallel welts on his temple look to Sanchez as if they came from a belt buckle. The boy is extremely active and skitters about the room, throwing stuffed animals around and trying to grab Sanchez's pen.

The woman says that her son was playing with the boyfriend's seven-year-old sister. "He was trying to get away from her, and he fell down the stairs. I screamed when I saw his face. My main concern is my son. We went straight to the hospital."

"Have you ever been abusive to your son?"

"No!" Her son crawls onto her lap and pinches her face. She points at him and says, "That's why he acts like this. Nobody ever gives him a whuppin' or nothin'."

Sanchez asks the woman to take off the boy's shirt and pants so he can examine him. His body appears unmarked, but he has a diaper rash so severe that there are scabs on his buttocks.

"I'm going to level with you," Sanchez says. "The doctor said some of these bruises don't look like they came from a fall."

"He fell!" the woman shouts. "I'd never let anyone hurt my son."

The boy crawls off her lap and rolls onto a blanket.

"I'm concerned," Sanchez says. "I want to take the child to a facility where they specialize in this kind of thing. They'll do a thorough investigation."

The mother's chest convulses in a sob. "I'd never hurt my son!" she says. "Nobody going to touch my son unless they go through me."

"I don't want to scare you, but who would be the next person to take care of the child if you couldn't?" Sanchez asks.

She covers her eyes, tears sluicing through her fingers. Her son jumps up, tugs at her pants, and shouts, "Mommy! Mommy!" The woman drops her hands to her knees, emits a sigh of resignation, and

says, "Family first." She points to her son and says, "His grandfather, my dad, would be the best person."

Sanchez steps out of the room, takes a deep breath, and exhales slowly. He wants to make the arrangements immediately. The child, he believes, isn't safe at home. He is unable to reach the father, but the grandfather agrees to care for the boy after he's taken to a clinic at L.A. County-USC Medical Center that specializes in forensic examinations of abused children. Sanchez won't know the results until the next day.

The child of farmworkers in Oxnard, Sanchez spent his summers picking celery and strawberries. Now 39, he was the first in his family to attend college. After graduating from Cal State Northridge, he worked in a group home for pregnant teenagers. Many had been sexually assaulted and physically abused as children. Wanting to continue to help children, he signed up for a county program that pays students to obtain a master's degree in social work if they commit to working at DCFS for two years.

At 11 a.m. the next morning Sanchez receives the faxed report from the county clinic, which confirms the findings of the emergency room physician. The boy has no broken bones, but the examination reveals that the "findings are inconsistent with accidental trauma, inconsistent with falling off the steps since child does not have any body injuries, only facial trauma." The bruises are "in various stages of healing."

At this point Sanchez doesn't know how the child was injured. Was it the mother? Her boyfriend? The boyfriend's sister?

A few days after receiving Sanchez's report, a juvenile court judge awards temporary custody to the boy's father, whom Sanchez has been able to interview. The judge grants three supervised visits a week to the mother and prohibits her boyfriend from having contact with the child. Sanchez hands off the case to a DCFS investigator, who will do an intensive follow-up and present the findings at a court hearing in a few months.

Most people Sanchez talks to, he says, have a misconception about social workers. "People don't hear about the cases when we protect a child whose life is in danger, or work with parents so they don't abuse their kids, or convince a woman that she doesn't have to live with domestic violence. But those are the cases that keep me doing this kind of work." ■

Miles Corwin teaches literary journalism at UC Irvine. His feature on the LAPD anti-stalking unit appeared in the November 2008 issue of the magazine.