

By Jonathan Gainer

It never occurred to me that a simple courtroom could be a place where a family's life would be laid on a table for all to see and hear. But for one 14-year-old child molester and his family, that room became more than just a room, it brought their convoluted struggles, emotions and desires to light.

In July a Y-Press team was given permission to spend a day in the Marion Superior Court Juvenile Division. Over a five hour period, we observed 10 cases. The cases dealt with a variety of crimes included assaults on peers, truancy, possession, and dealing cocaine. Some of the kids wore street attire, others wore jail garb complete with shackles. One case however demonstrated how a single hearing can examine the intimate life of a Latino family. Through a tangled web of information and an interpreter one case chronicled the story of a 14-year-old boy who sexually molested his 7-year-old half-sister.

After being in custody for close to three weeks, a weary looking boy with slumped shoulders, untidy hair and a haggard expression walked into the courtroom and sat next to his parents. Not much shorter than I and looking even younger, he seemed to be an anomaly, sitting in courtroom, being charged with such a crime. I wondered what it's like for the parents to have to deal with their son, an offender; and daughter, a victim. How would they console their daughter, and yet reprove their son? That alone must have created complicated dynamic for them. How would they ensure that their three other daughters were safe? This wasn't a simple case of a sibling fight this was molestation

And what must it be like for the sister to cope with what her brother had done to her? Would she ever be able to hang out with him? Or even look at him without recalling the incident that brought them to court? But most of all I wondered what it was like for the brother. Of course he told the court he was remorseful. But outwardly he looked apathetic, and I wondered how badly he actually felt. Who knows what led him to do what he did, but he must have put *some* thought into it; he must have realized he would be doing this to his half/sister. Unfortunately, I never got those questions answered. However, I did receive some insight as to what the parents were thinking.

The most poignant moment of the hearing occurred when the stepfather in spite of the fact that the boy is not his biological son, and that the victim was his biological daughter. Gave a dramatic speech about he and his wife would like to keep the family together. His dad was well aware of what the boy had done, and yet he wanted him to come home. The father said, "Family means a lot to us, and we understand that my son made a mistake, but we have talked to our daughters, and my wife has quit her job to stay at home with the kids; we want to keep the family together." In light of all that had transpired the mother was willing to quit her job, to try to ensure that no incidents would happen again. That showed dedication to the family.

After acknowledging the father's desire to keep the family together, while apologetic, Magistrate Danielle Gregory was unable grant his request.

Although she would allow the boy to go home with relatives or friends he couldn't return to same household as the person he offended. Unfortunately there was no one to take care of him, so he had to return to detention.

After a day observing the juvenile court system, I understood the type of potential that a simple courtroom could have. That it wasn't merely desks, chairs and the customary legal officers; a bailiff, prosecutors, defendants and a judge. The court system was able to shed light on a dark subject and hopefully in this case improve the lives of those who walk through its doors.

For y-press this is John Gather.