

GIVING UP ON MOM ? GWEN CHRISTIAN KNOWS THE WORST OF MICHIGAN'S FOSTER CARE SYSTEM. IN IT SINCE AGE 6, SHE'S BEEN BEATEN, ABUSED AND REJECTED. NOW 18, CHRISTIAN HAS A 2-YEAR-OLD SON -- WHO'S ALSO BEEN PUT IN FOSTER CARE. SHE SAYS SHE DESERVES A CHANCE TO RAISE HIM. THE STATE ARGUES SHE'S AN UNFIT MOM. \ FRIDAY, A COURT WILL DECIDE.

Detroit Free Press (MI) - Wednesday, February 25, 1998

Author: JACK KRESNAK Free Press Staff Writer

Gwen Christian has seen the absolute worst of Michigan's child welfare system.

Since being placed in her first foster home at age 6, Christian has been beaten with fists and electrical cords, sexually abused and exposed to satanism. She has been rejected by at least one foster parent as unmanageable and rubbed down with witch hazel by another to hide the bruising.

Christian has grown into an angry and bitter 18-year-old who doesn't trust adults, especially social workers.

Under the supposed protection of Michigan's child welfare system, her life has been hell. It's a truth officials at the state Family Independence Agency freely admit.

Now, as an adult, she faces the greatest struggle of her life; one that pits her against the agencies that have failed her.

She is fighting for the right to raise her 2-year-old son, Santoy.

The state is seeking to sever her parental rights. On Friday, a juvenile court referee will rule on the request.

That wasn't the FIA's first choice, but officials there said Christian's history of running away and her hostile attitude toward workers in the child welfare system make it impossible for them to reunite her with her son.

And under state law, they have to reunite the family or sever its ties. The FIA is required to find a permanent home for children who've been in foster care longer than a year. The aim is to prevent children from languishing in such care. Santoy has been in foster care his entire life.

Christian has given the FIA reasons to be concerned.

She has tried marijuana, escaped from various foster care facilities and mental hospitals, verbally and physically attacked child-care workers, and refused to cooperate or to stay in one place long enough to get help.

But Christian said she has done the best she could over the years, and her experiences have made her more mature. Stronger.

"The system didn't raise me," she said. "I basically raised myself."

Christian's is an extraordinary story, and a troubling one because it illustrates how difficult it can be to help abused and neglected children and how those attempts can backfire.

She says she deserves a chance.

"Of course, I want to finish school and go to college and put my son through school," said Christian, whose goal is to become a pediatrician or a model. "I want to live a normal life like a normal mother and son."

Life has been anything but normal for her, according to interviews with Christian, her sister, attorneys and child welfare workers, and juvenile court files in Wayne and Oakland counties.

She and her two sisters were first placed into foster care in April 1986 after their drug-addicted mother had abandoned them for a month.

Christian's first foster mother practiced satanism and beat her with extension cords, according to court records.

Her second foster home stay lasted about six months.

Eventually, Christian said, "the foster mother kicked me out...."

"I wanted to go back home; I wanted my parents," she said. "I would talk back: 'You ain't my momma! You can't tell me what to do!'"

The then-Michigan Department of Social Services sent her to Christ Child House, a residential facility for abused and neglected children in Detroit. She stayed 2 1/2 years.

"I didn't want to leave," Christian said. "There was a whole bunch of kids there and they were bad, just like me. The staff there was nice."

Her mother, who failed to visit her at the home, lost parental rights in 1989.

In March 1990, Orchards Children's Services found foster parents willing to take all three girls and, if things worked out, to adopt them.

"It was a dream couple," Orchards President Gerald Levin said of Lamont and Gwendolyn Denise Christian.

The Christians passed every screen, including criminal and child protective services records checks. They had solid references. Gwendolyn Denise Christian was a social worker with DSS, now the FIA. It is a job she still holds.

Her husband, Lamont, a dealer in African-American art, was a decorated Vietnam veteran and a recruiter for foster parents with the Michigan Foster and Adoptive Parents Association. He appeared in a DSS video promoting foster parenting. The couple already had two foster boys.

Orchards felt this was the last and best chance to find a permanent home for the three girls. The girls were adopted in 1991.

About six months into her stay with the Christians, Gwen Christian said, Lamont Christian started touching her sexually. It always happened when Lamont's wife was away.

Gwen Christian's defiant attitude also clashed often with her adoptive father's penchant for corporal punishment.

"I wanted to leave. I couldn't have no phone calls, no friends, no visitors," she said. "He started knocking me around."

On the last day of school in June 1993, just before the family was set to take a vacation down South, Gwen Christian decided to tell a teacher about the sexual abuse she and one of her sisters had suffered. Police and Child Protective Services workers soon arrived.

The Christians' home was across the street from the school and Gwen Christian remembers a look of shock on Lamont Christian's face as he spotted her being driven away in a police car.

Gwen Christian testified against her adoptive father, who was convicted in 1994 of six counts of criminal sexual conduct and sentenced to 6-15 years in prison. He is being held at the Muskegon Temporary Facility. He did not respond to a letter the Free Press sent to him three weeks ago.

The Christians' parental rights to the three girls were terminated in July 1995.

In and out of homes

Gwen Christian was placed in several other residential and shelter programs. She resisted them all. She sassied those in authority. She ran away whenever she could. She petitioned probate court to be released from Hawthorn Center, a state-run psychiatric hospital for children.

On one of her runaway escapades, she found herself with a man in Detroit who she said treated her nice, until she tried to leave. She said he raped her. Later, she learned she was pregnant.

Because Santoy was born at Botsford Hospital in Farmington Hills, the Oakland County FIA became involved and a petition was filed seeking court jurisdiction over him. Attorney Karen Gullberg Cook was appointed to represent Christian, and Cook fought an attempt to transfer the case to Wayne County, where Christian was a court ward.

Things went badly at first. Christian would run away from yet another placement and Cook found little to say on her behalf during the initial proceedings.

But behind the rebellious facade, Cook said, there was something solid in Christian that she could work with. She is bright, articulate, street-savvy and good-natured, Cook said.

"I thought this case was in the toilet months ago," Cook said. "I'm amazed. Gwen has gone off on me and tried to fire me. She has quite a temper."

But, Cook said, it is clear that Christian loves her son and that Santoy has bonded with his mother.

Christian's legal guardian is Bill Johnson, superintendent of the Michigan Children's Institute, a division of the FIA that is responsible for all children made available for adoption by court action. She'll remain his ward until age 19. Such children are typically protected from news media scrutiny.

"She's had an extremely difficult journey through the foster care system," said Johnson, adding he is troubled by Christian's decision to speak to the Free Press.

"I don't know how it will benefit her to have that kind of information put into a newspaper," said Johnson, who has met Christian once. "She may not fully understand the implications of this."

Cook has fought with Orchards and the FIA over the care of Santoy, who has been in five foster homes. When the child lost several teeth after falling off a stool -- and the agency failed to tell his mother about it in a timely manner -- Cook threatened to get the agency's license revoked.

Orchards officials said not notifying Christian quickly was an oversight.

Most people familiar with the case said that if it hadn't been for Cook, Christian already would have lost her parental rights to Santoy.

"She's the best attorney I ever had," Christian said of Cook.

Cook arranged a psychological assessment last September by Dr. Grenae Dudley, who recommended that the state make more of an effort to help Christian become the parent she wants to be.

"Gwendolyn Christian is the product of a system that created her," Dudley wrote in her report. "It is therefore the responsibility of the system to try and repair the damages that have resulted."

Dudley said mother and son should be "in a setting where she and her child could be together for more than three hours per week.... Learning parenting in a classroom setting is one thing, experiencing being a parent on a day-to-day basis is another."

Cook said the system might repeat its mistakes with Santoy.

"The system makes a lousy parent," Cook said. "Gwen deserves a chance. I think the baby would be OK with her. I wouldn't be fighting so hard if I didn't think so."

Jack Kresnak can be reached at 1-313-223-4544.

ONE CHILD'S LIFE IN FOSTER CARE

April 1986: Highland Park Police find Gwen Christian, 6, and her two older sisters home alone -- their mother had left a month before, they said. The girls are made temporary wards of the court.

June 1987: Amid accusations of abuse and Satanism, Christian is removed from her first foster home.

Nov. 11, 1987: After talking back to her foster mother, Christian is removed from her second foster home and sent to Christ Child House, a residential home for abused and neglected children in Detroit.

June 1, 1989: Christian is made a permanent court ward, available for adoption.

March 20, 1990: She is placed in the Detroit home of Lamont and Gwendolyn Denise Christian.

July 9, 1991: The three sisters are adopted by the Christians.

June 18, 1993: Gwen Christian tells a teacher that her father sexually abused her. Days later, she and her sisters are placed in another foster home.

April 19, 1994: Christian is moved to Vista Maria, a residential facility for abused, neglected and delinquent girls in Detroit, the first of more than 30 placements in the next 3 1/2 years.

May 12, 1994: Lamont Christian is convicted on six counts of criminal sexual conduct; he is sentenced to 6-15 years in prison.

July 6, 1995: The Christians' parental rights are terminated. Gwen Christian is made a permanent court ward -- available for adoption -- for the second time.

Jan. 21, 1996: Christian, 15, delivers a son, Santoy. The father, she says, raped her.

Jan. 26, 1996: Santoy, who has serious medical problems, is placed in a foster home.

Feb. 7, 1996: Santoy is moved to a second foster home because he was neglected at the first.

Feb. 9, 1996: Santoy is reunited with his mother in a residential program for young mothers at St. Vincent/Sarah Fisher Center in Farmington Hills.

April 26, 1996: Sarah Fisher workers, troubled by Christian's belligerence and angry outbursts, ask to have Santoy moved to a foster home because they believe the child is at risk in her care. Christian is later sent to Aurora psychiatric hospital in Detroit for an assessment. She escapes and goes to stay with biological family members in Detroit.

June 21, 1996: Christian is placed in Hawthorn Center, a state-run psychiatric hospital for children in Northville Township. Santoy is brought to visit with her for three hours every week.

Sept. 7, 1996: Christian runs away from Hawthorn Center and is returned there Nov. 4. She petitions probate court to be released.

Dec. 12, 1996: Christian's request to be released is granted. She is placed at Grove Hill shelter, then with Vista Maria, where she runs away days later.

May 1997: Christian is placed at Children's Home of Detroit in Grosse Pointe Woods, where she starts counseling and parenting classes. She is allowed weekly visits with Santoy.

July 29, 1997: Santoy, 1 1/2, is moved to a new foster home, his fifth.

Aug. 25, 1997: FIA and Orchards Children's Services, Michigan's largest private foster care agency, file a petition in Oakland County Juvenile Court to terminate Christian's parental rights, accusing her of not cooperating with the agencies.

Feb. 27: Juvenile Court referee Martin Alvin is scheduled to rule on the termination.

Source: Juvenile Court files in Wayne and Oakland counties.

Caption: Photo PAULINE LUBENS/Detroit Free Press

Gwen Christian, 18, snuggles with her son, Santoy, 2, during a recent visit. Christian is allowed one three-hour visit a week. "I want to live a normal life like a normal mother and son," the teenager says.

Memo: SIDEBAR ATTACHED

Edition: METRO FINAL

Section: NWS

Page: 1A

Index Terms: CHRONOLOGY ; JUVENILE ; FOSTER CARE ; MICHIGAN ; MAJOR STORY ; GWEN ; CHRISTIAN

Record Number: 9802250026

Copyright (c) 1998 Detroit Free Press