

Teen time bomb's fuse burns short as mom despairs

Ocala Star-Banner (FL) - March 21, 1992

- Author/Byline: Laura Kauffmann; Staff Writer
- Edition: Marion
- Section: News
- Page: 1A

EDITOR'S NOTE: The names of the principals have been changed to protect their privacy.

OCALA -- Sipping from a pink mug that proclaimed "You're the Best Mom in the World," Donna [REDACTED] dropped the bombshell somewhere between her eighth and ninth cup of coffee of the morning.

"If only Michael had a drug problem," she mused, "we could deal with that. We continually had him tested for drugs, hoping it'd come back positive. If I could just put my thumb on the problem, I could fix it. . . . Michael was the exception to the rule. His behavioral problems came before the drugs."

But for Donna and her family, who have been through Tough Love and Operation Turnaround and back again, there are no quick fixes. Instead, there is mounting debt and a parent's worst nightmare: a darling of a child, bright, sweet -- and totally incorrigible.

He is, in his mother's own estimation, a criminal genius innocently disguised as the blond-haired, blue-eyed boy next door.

Child in trouble, troubled child

Today, Michael is in as much trouble as a child can be. He has eight separate cases pending -- seven from this year alone -- on charges from criminal mischief and shoplifting to burglary and grand theft. He is to appear in juvenile court on March 24 to be sentenced and will most likely be ordered to attend Eckerd's Youth Camp, which offers longterm treatment.

But Eckerd's has a two-month waiting list and the longest Michael can remain in detention following sentencing is 15 days. With 40 recorded runaways under his belt, Donna guesses he'll last two days before he runs again.

To make matters worse, somewhere along the line Michael ran right into Dennis Ross, an ex-felon whose homosexual lover from prison has tested positive for the virus that causes AIDS. Ross was sentenced Friday to 150 years in prison for sexually abusing Michael on at least five occasions.

Donna [REDACTED] says she saw it all coming. In a letter last year to 5th Circuit Judge Jack Singbush, Donna wrote:

"As difficult and complex as this story is to start, I find it ironic that I have always known how it will end. The chronicle of my son's life will indeed have a terribly sad outcome, and although I foresaw and predicted this outcome years ago, I have been unable to alter or change what has now been determined unchangeable."

Trying for a normal life

The [REDACTED] modest mobile home sits on a beautiful, shaded lot on the west fringes of the county. Its walls are covered with family portraits of Donna, her husband, Ken, and their two children, Michael 15, and Kimberly, 17.

Kimberly is a Florida Academic Honors student who is headed to college armed with scholarships, money earned during after school employment and a fervent desire to get as far from her brother as possible.

"He's estranged the family so badly, there's no way we could be close again right away," Donna said. "His sister despises him. She hates him unmercifully. Our whole world revolves around Michael, and Kimberly has taken a back seat."

Michael came into the world a month early, weighing just a pinch more than 4 pounds. He was always "the adorable runt of the litter" and though the family tended to spoil him, there was never a hint of trouble, Donna maintains, until Michael turned 10.

That's when Donna said that her son, who has a higher than average IQ, became a classroom trouble-maker. His bad behavior escalated from there.

"I don't know what went wrong. We raised them with the same set of rules, with the same love. They're just one year apart. I've been wracking my brain trying to figure this out" Donna said.

The state Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services seemed to agree. Catherine Trammell, HRS district intake counselor, wrote in an April 1, 1991 report that: "(Michael [REDACTED]) social history reflects that this child does have an excellent support system in that of

his parents." Trammell wrote the [REDACTED] had "taken appropriate action" in handling the situation.

Guardian ad litem

tries to help

Donna said the guardian ad litem appointed to protect Michael's

interests was "bamboozled" by her son.

It's impossible to know what the guardian ad litem encountered in the case because she is prohibited from discussing it by state law. Jolene Cazzola, executive director of the 5th Judicial Circuit's Guardian Ad Litem program, acknowledges the constraints of the system and said, "If we had the answers to the problems, we wouldn't have the problems."

However, records show that if Michael's road to ruin was paved with good intentions, the family also encountered its share of roadblocks:

In April 1991, the [REDACTED] were ordered by the court to enroll Michael in the drug treatment program at Jacksonville Care Unit. Donna complained that Michael would not be accepted because he didn't have a drug problem, but grudgingly complied with the court order. Michael was then rejected by the program and the [REDACTED] retrieved their son a few days later. But the [REDACTED] were billed \$4,000 for room and board. They still owe \$424.

In May 1991, the [REDACTED] were ordered to take Michael to Straight Inc., another drug treatment program. Michael, who was in detention, was released to his parents on Mother's Day -- one day before they planned to take him to Orlando to enroll in the program.

Michael had given his mother a handmade Mother's Day card that said ". . . Please get me out soon. I think the best commitment program for me is my family right now! I love you!"

Michael lasted four hours before climbing out a bathroom window and taking off.

Donna then was arrested and handcuffed in front of her children and husband for indirect criminal contempt for failing to take Michael to the Straight program. The charge was later dismissed.

Due to a glitch in records, Donna was erroneously arrested a second time for the same contempt charge.

Donna tricked Michael into a trip to Orlando, telling him they were visiting relatives, when in fact she was taking him to the Straight program. Again, because he didn't have a drug problem, he wasn't accepted. Two days after returning home, Michael ran straight to Dennis Ross' apartment, where he was sexually abused.

Trying to let go

"There's such a fine line between proper parental supervision and excessive supervision. It's not acceptable to lock Michael in a room without windows to make sure he'll show up at his next hearing. And yet, they continually released him to us instead of locking him up," Donna said.

Donna had to quit her bookkeeping job of 10 years because Michael was suspended from school so often his supervision became a full-time job. The [REDACTED] have used every penny of the \$50,000 in mental health benefits from their insurance company and have spent about \$20,000 more to treat their son, and -- between Michael's pending cases and Dennis Ross' trial -- they have logged more than 200 hours in court.

Michael, now in detention and, according to his mother, seemingly remorseful, wants to be emancipated as an adult.

"Part of me wants to say, that's it. I don't want to play with this thing any more. I'm tired of being summoned to court, chastised for being a bad parent, told I'm the bad guy. But the mother in me says, no way can I leave him on his own," Donna said.

- Caption: COLOR PHOTO Doug Engle/Star-Banner Dennis Ross is finger printed by bailiff Bill Giles, right, after Judge Jack Singbush sentenced him to 150 years for sexual battery on a 15-year old boy. Ross was sentenced in the Marion County Judicial Center Friday afternoon.

- Record: 25079

- Copyright: Copyright (c) 1992, 2004 Ocala Star-Banner