

PLANT CITY — The family had lived in the rundown rental house for almost three years when someone first saw a child's face in the window.

A little girl, pale, with dark eyes, lifted a dirty blanket above the broken glass and peered out, one neighbor remembered.

Everyone knew a woman lived in the house with her boyfriend and two adult sons. But they had never seen a child there, had never noticed anyone playing in the overgrown yard.

The girl looked young, 5 or 6, and thin. Too thin. Her cheeks seemed sunken; her eyes were lost.

The child stared into the square of sunlight, then slipped away.

Months went by. The face never reappeared.

Just before noon on July 13, 2005, a Plant City police car pulled up outside that shattered window. Two officers went into the house — and one stumbled back out.

Clutching his stomach, the rookie retched in the weeds.

Plant City Detective Mark Holste had been on the force for 18 years when he and his young partner were sent to the house on Old Sydney Road to stand by during a child abuse investigation. Someone had finally called the police.

They found a car parked outside. The driver's door was open and a woman was slumped over in her seat, sobbing. She was an investigator for the Florida Department of Children and Families.

"Unbelievable," she told Holste. "The worst I've ever seen."

The police officers walked through the front door, into a cramped living room.

"I've been in rooms with bodies rotting there for a week and it never stunk that bad," Holste said later. "There's just no way to describe it. Urine and feces — dog, cat and human excrement — smeared on the walls, mashed into the carpet. Everything dank and rotting."

Tattered curtains, yellow with cigarette smoke, dangling from bent metal rods. Cardboard and old comforters stuffed into broken, grimy windows. Trash blanketing the stained couch, the sticky counters.

The floor, walls, even the ceiling seemed to sway beneath legions of scuttling roaches.

"It sounded like you were walking on eggshells. You couldn't take a step without crunching German cockroaches," the detective said. "They were in the lights, in the furniture. Even inside the freezer. The freezer!"

While Holste looked around, a stout woman in a faded housecoat demanded to know what was going on. Yes, she lived there. Yes, those were her two sons in the living room. Her daughter? Well, yes, she had a daughter . . .

The detective strode past her, down a narrow hall. He turned the handle on a door, which opened into a space the size of a walk-in closet. He squinted in the dark.

At his feet, something stirred.

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First he saw the girl's eyes: dark and wide, unfocused, unblinking. She wasn't looking at him so much as through him.

She lay on a torn, moldy mattress on the floor. She was curled on her side, long legs tucked into her emaciated chest. Her ribs and collarbone jutted out; one skinny arm was slung over her face; her black hair was matted, crawling with lice. Insect bites, rashes and sores pocked her skin. Though she looked old enough to be in school, she was naked — except for a swollen diaper.

"The pile of dirty diapers in that room must have been 4 feet high," the detective said. "The glass in the window had been broken, and that child was just lying there, surrounded by her own excrement and bugs."

When he bent to lift her, she yelped like a lamb. "It felt like I was picking up a baby," Holste said. "I put her over my shoulder, and that diaper started leaking down my leg."

The girl didn't struggle. Holste asked, "What's your name, honey?" The girl didn't seem to hear.

He searched for clothes to dress her, but found only balled-up laundry, flecked with feces. He looked for a toy, a doll, a stuffed animal. "But the only ones I found were covered in maggots and roaches."

Choking back rage, he approached the mother. How could you let this happen?

"The mother's statement was: 'I'm doing the best I can,'" the detective said. "I told her, 'The best you can sucks!'"

He wanted to arrest the woman right then, but when he called his boss he was told to let DCF do its own investigation.

So the detective carried the girl down the dim hall, past her brothers, past her mother in the doorway, who was shrieking, "Don't take my baby!" He buckled the child into the state investigator's car. The investigator agreed: They had to get the girl out of there.

"Radio ahead to Tampa General," the detective remembers telling his partner. "If this child doesn't get to a hospital, she's not going to make it."

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Her name, her mother had said, was Danielle. She was almost 7 years old.

She weighed 46 pounds. She was malnourished and anemic. In the pediatric intensive care unit they tried to feed the girl, but she couldn't chew or swallow solid food. So they put her on an IV and let her drink from a bottle.

Aides bathed her, scrubbed the sores on her face, trimmed her torn fingernails. They had to cut her tangled hair before they could comb out the lice.

Her caseworker determined that she had never been to school, never seen a doctor. She didn't know how to hold a doll, didn't understand peek-a-boo. "Due to the severe neglect," a doctor would write, "the child will be disabled for the rest of her life."

Hunched in an oversized crib, Danielle curled in on herself like a potato bug, then writhed angrily, kicking and thrashing. To calm herself, she batted at her toes and sucked her fists. "Like an infant," one doctor wrote.

She wouldn't make eye contact. She didn't react to heat or cold — or pain. The insertion of an IV needle elicited no reaction. She never cried. With a nurse holding her hands, she could stand and walk sideways on her toes, like a crab. She couldn't talk, didn't know how to nod yes or no. Once in a while she grunted.

She couldn't tell anyone what had happened, what was wrong, what hurt.

Dr. Kathleen Armstrong, director of pediatric psychology at the University of South Florida medical school, was the first psychologist to examine Danielle. She said medical tests, brain scans, and vision, hearing and genetics checks found nothing wrong with the child. She wasn't deaf, wasn't autistic, had no physical ailments such as cerebral palsy or muscular dystrophy.

The doctors and social workers had no way of knowing all that had happened to Danielle. But the scene at the house, along with Danielle's almost comatose condition, led them to believe she had never been cared for beyond basic sustenance. Hard as it was to imagine, they doubted she had ever been taken out in the sun, sung to sleep, even hugged or held. She was fragile and beautiful, but whatever makes a person human seemed somehow missing.

Armstrong called the girl's condition "environmental autism." Danielle had been deprived of interaction for so long, the doctor believed, that she had withdrawn into herself.

The most extraordinary thing about Danielle, Armstrong said, was her lack of engagement with people, with anything. "There was no light in her eye, no response or recognition. . . . We saw a little girl who didn't even respond to hugs or affection. Even a child with the most severe autism responds to those."

Danielle's was "the most outrageous case of neglect I've ever seen."

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The authorities had discovered the rarest and most pitiable of creatures: a feral child.

The term is not a diagnosis. It comes from historic accounts — some fictional, some true — of children raised by animals and therefore not exposed to human nurturing. Wolf boys and bird girls, Tarzan, Mowgli from *The Jungle Book*.

It's said that during the Holy Roman Empire, Frederick II gave a group of infants to some nuns. He told them to take care of the children but never to speak to them. He believed the babies would eventually reveal the true language of God. Instead, they died from the lack of interaction.

Then there was the Wild Boy of Aveyron, who wandered out of the woods near Paris in 1800, naked and grunting. He was about 12. A teacher took him in and named him Victor. He tried to socialize the child, teach him to talk. But after several years, he gave up on the teen and asked the housekeeper to care for him.

"In the first five years of life, 85 percent of the brain is developed," said Armstrong, the psychologist who examined Danielle. "Those early relationships, more than anything else, help wire the brain and provide children with the experience to trust, to develop language, to communicate. They need that system to relate to the world."

The importance of nurturing has been shown again and again. In the 1960s, psychologist Harry Harlow put groups of infant rhesus monkeys in a room with two artificial mothers. One, made of wire, dispensed food. The other, of terrycloth, extended cradled arms. Though they were starving, the baby monkeys all climbed into the warm cloth arms.

"Primates need comfort even more than they need food," Armstrong said.

The most recent case of a feral child was in 1970, in California. A girl whom therapists came to call Genie had been strapped to a potty chair until she was 13. Like the Wild Boy, Genie was studied in hospitals and laboratories. She was in her 20s when doctors realized she'd never talk, never be able to take care of herself. She ended up in foster care, closed off from the world, utterly dependent.

Danielle's case — which unfolded out of the public spotlight, without a word in the media — raised disturbing questions for everyone trying to help her. How could this have happened? What kind of mother would sit by year after year while her daughter languished in her own filth, starving and crawling with bugs?

And why hadn't someone intervened? The neighbors, the authorities — where had they been?

"It's mind-boggling that in the 21st century we can still have a child who's just left in a room like a gerbil," said Tracy Sheehan, Danielle's guardian in the legal system and now a circuit court judge. "No food. No one talking to her or reading her a story. She can't even use her hands. How could this child be so invisible?"

But the most pressing questions were about her future.

When Danielle was discovered, she was younger by six years than the Wild Boy or Genie, giving hope that she might yet be teachable. Many of her caregivers had high hopes they could make her whole.

Danielle had probably missed the chance to learn speech, but maybe she could come to understand language, to communicate in other ways.

Still, doctors had only the most modest ambitions for her.

"My hope was that she would be able to sleep through the night, to be out of diapers and to feed herself," Armstrong said. If things went really well, she said, Danielle would end up "in a nice nursing home."

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Danielle spent six weeks at Tampa General before she was well enough to leave. But where could she go? Not home; Judge Martha Cook, who oversaw her dependency hearing, ordered that Danielle be placed in foster care and that her mother not be allowed to call or visit her. The mother was being investigated on criminal child abuse charges.

"That child, she broke my heart," Cook said later. "We were so distraught over her condition, we agonized over what to do."

Eventually, Danielle was placed in a group home in Land O'Lakes. She had a bed with sheets and a pillow, clothes and food, and someone at least to change her diapers.

In October 2005, a couple of weeks after she turned 7, Danielle started school for the first time. She was placed in a special ed class at Sanders Elementary.

"Her behavior was different than any child I'd ever seen," said Kevin O'Keefe, Danielle's first teacher. "If you put food anywhere near her, she'd grab it" and mouth it like a baby, he said. "She had a lot of episodes of great agitation, yelling, flailing her arms, rolling into a fetal position. She'd curl up in a closet, just to be away from everyone. She didn't know how to climb a slide or swing on a swing. She didn't want to be touched."

It took her a year just to become consolable, he said.

By Thanksgiving 2006 — a year and a half after Danielle had gone into foster care — her caseworker was thinking about finding her a permanent home.

A nursing home, group home or medical foster care facility could take care of Danielle. But she needed more.

"In my entire career with the child welfare system, I don't ever remember a child like Danielle," said Luanne Panacek, executive director of the Children's Board of Hillsborough County. "It makes you think about what does quality of life mean? What's the best we can hope for her? After all she's been through, is it just being safe?"

That fall, Panacek decided to include Danielle in the Heart Gallery — a set of portraits depicting children available for adoption. The Children's Board displays the pictures in malls and on the Internet in hopes that people will fall in love with the children and take them home.

In Hillsborough alone, 600 kids are available for adoption. Who, Panacek wondered, would choose an 8-year-old who was still in diapers, who didn't know her own name and might not ever speak or let you hug her?

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The day Danielle was supposed to have her picture taken for the Heart Gallery, she showed up with red Kool-Aid dribbled down her new blouse. She hadn't yet mastered a sippy cup.

Garet White, Danielle's care manager, scrubbed the girl's shirt and washed her face. She brushed Danielle's bangs from her forehead and begged the photographer to please be patient.

White stepped behind the photographer and waved at Danielle. She put her thumbs in her ears and wiggled her hands, stuck out her tongue and rolled her eyes. Danielle didn't even blink.

White was about to give up when she heard a sound she'd never heard from Danielle. The child's eyes were still dull, apparently unseeing. But her mouth was open. She looked like she was trying to laugh.