

Girl's death still haunts attendant

Horror of Bortner case prompts action to stop abuse



KASSIDY BORTNER
Child abuse victim

By **JENNIFER L. SAUNDERS**
Democrat Staff Writer

KITTERY, Maine — From his years of work in the funeral profession, Mark J. Sousa has been trained to keep his emotions in check. But the sight of Cassidy Bortner's small, bruised body in the hours after her death haunts him to this day.

Kassidy Caitlyn Bortner was pronounced dead at York Hospital on Nov. 9. Police at once called her death "suspicious," and her mother's live-in boyfriend has since been indicted on second-degree murder and multiple assault charges in

connection with the child's death.

At the time of her death, Kassidy and her mother, 19-year-old Amanda Bortner, had resided with Chad E. Evans, 29, at his 191 Milton Road home in Rochester, N.H., for about two months.

With three months now passed, Sousa decided to talk with Foster's Daily Democrat because he hopes the truth about what happened to Kassidy will incense residents in both Maine and New Hampshire enough to call for protection of other children living with abuse.

As an employee of an area funeral home, Sousa was called to York Hospital

the day Kassidy died to transport her body to the Maine Chief Medical Examiner's Office in Augusta.

"I thought I was mentally prepared to deal with it as you're taught to deal with other deaths," Sousa said. "In my profession, I've dealt with bodies of people that have been murdered, with suicides and burn victims. This was the worst and the most difficult for me to deal with."

At the hospital, Sousa was told authorities from both Maine and New Hampshire

☆ **Kassidy**

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would be performing a preliminary examination of Kassidy's body. Sousa was asked to assist with moving and turning the child's body as evidentiary photographs were taken.

"I had a very difficult time dealing with the fact that I was looking at this beautiful little angel laying on this sheet, covered from head to toe with bruises."

Sousa said he looked down at the 21-month-old girl's face and body and was appalled by the number of bruises and other signs of abuse he witnessed.

He was equally appalled to learn that charges were being brought only against the individual suspected of inflicting

those injuries — and not against those who knew or suspected the abuse.

"I am personally very upset at the fact that neither Maine nor New Hampshire has brought charges against the mother of the child.

In my opinion after seeing the body of this child, I believe with all my heart the mother knew exactly what was going on and did nothing to stop it," Sousa said.

In New Hampshire State Police affidavits filed at Rochester District Court in the first weeks after Kassidy's death, Kassidy's mother told police Evans abused her daughter for as long as six weeks before her death.

Bortner told police of several incidents where Evans would grab Kassidy's face and throw her against the wall, grab her arm and throw her against the wall, and choke the child to stop her from crying.

"Kassidy's face and body and legs and arms and neck were covered with bruises — not to mention someone took something like a wire hairbrush and repeatedly hit the bottom of her feet," Sousa said, shaking his head.

"There is no logical, innocent explanation for the condition of her body. She even had a bruise on the roof of her mouth."

Although she has admitted witnessing the repeated abuse

against her daughter, Bortner has not been charged with any crime in connection with her daughter's death. Sousa said he imagines Bortner has not been charged in an effort to have her testify against her former boyfriend.

"If they need to, they can do that by giving her a reduced charge. She would still testify, but be charged and still pay in some small way for what she allowed to happen to her daughter," he said.

Sousa said he holds Bortner responsible, as Kassidy's mother, for what happened to the little girl. However, he believes there were many individuals close to Bortner and Evans who either knew or suspected the abuse and did not report what they saw.

"This child went through pure hell in the last months of her life. Not being able to find anybody to protect her from the person who was abusing her more than likely tormented her as much as the physical abuse she endured," Sousa said.

According to court documents, relatives and friends of both Bortner and Evans in Maine and New Hampshire admitted to witnessing bruises on Kassidy's face and body in the weeks leading up to her death.

On the morning of Nov. 9, Kassidy was brought to the Kittery home of her aunt, Jennifer Conley. Conley's boyfriend, F. Jefferey Marshall, was the last to see Kassidy alive. The child was placed on a bed in the apartment where she remained until he called Kittery police

require anyone with reason to suspect abuse to report it to police or the Department of Human Services. The bill's co-sponsor, Rep. Stephen Estes, D-Kittery, introduced the amendment to protect children after learning the details of Kassidy's life.

Sousa said he supports the bill, but wants to be sure this mandatory reporting law carries with it severe penalties. For example, he said, if an individual does not report abuse and a child is killed or seriously injured, he or she should be subject to felony charges.

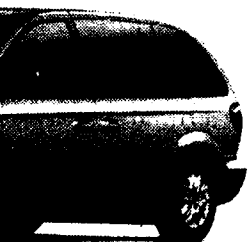
Officials in New Hampshire have stated they do not expect any additional charges to be filed against anyone who knew of the abuse against Kassidy — even though the state has a mandatory reporting law for anyone with reason to suspect child abuse.

"There was no way possible that somebody would not have noticed there was something drastically wrong with this child," Sousa said. "In my opinion, a person would have to be blind not to suspect abuse."

Sousa said he plans to attend the public hearing phase of the Maine legislation in Augusta once a date is set.

"We need to look at laws, to strengthen laws in every state in this county to ensure that children have some type of protection. We need to have a law with teeth. We have to get serious about this and crack down on this. Otherwise, these kids are just going to keep dying. We can't allow the inno-

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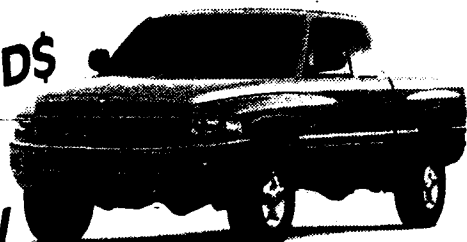


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As Maine residents, neither Conley nor Marshall was required to report the signs of abuse they told police they witnessed for weeks before Cassidy died. Without a mandatory reporting law, officials have said they could not charge any Maine residents who might have known of the abuse with any crime.

That is something Sousa wants to see changed. He is no stranger to the state Legislature, due in part to his terms on the Kittery Town Council. He said he is in favor of a bill introduced in the Maine State Legislature to

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"We need to look at laws, to strengthen laws in every state in this county to ensure that children have some type of protection. We need to have a law with teeth. We have to get serious about this and crack down on this. Otherwise, these kids are just going to keep dying. We can't allow the innocence of children to be drained at the hands of animals."

In the meantime, Cassidy is never far from his thoughts.

"This victim was the most innocent victim you could find," he said. "Seeing pictures of her when she was alive makes you realize how precious she must have been. How savage the end of her life was."

Sousa took a deep breath, thinking back to that cold November afternoon when he stood with police, medical personnel and others in an examination room at York Hospital.

"Everybody who was there shed tears for her," he said softly. "Although she is gone, she won't be forgotten."