

Abstract

Title – What Goes Unnoticed:

Program of Study – Cinematic Arts

Presentation Type – Creative arts

Subtype – Film Mentor and Mentor Email – Stuart Bennett (sbennett39@liberty.edu)

Student Name and Email – Jessica Schlagenhaft (jsschlagenhaft@liberty.edu)

This film is to highlight what millions of children in America go through every year and highlights the research process that developed my senior thesis film, *What Goes Unnoticed*.

After working in a day care facility that had many foster kids come through their doors, I was opened up to a whole new world. An unnamed student would constantly update me on when his social worker would come visit, and how that affected his life at home. I immediately decided to make this the center of my senior thesis film and got in contact with some actual child service case workers in New Jersey. They told me about how the pandemic altered child neglect, the horrific scenes they would encounter, and also all the great impacts they have had on families. I did extensive research before making this into a film since this topic for many is sensitive.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, child neglect and abuse was on the rise. Social workers were not able to visit as often due to restrictions. Financial stress, isolation, and doing school from home were all factors that led to child neglect and abuse. Using data from the National Syndromic Surveillance Program, I was able to analyze that even when child service visits declined, the amount of cases that resulted in hospitalization increased. Child abuse was able to thrive behind closed doors since parents and guardians did not have that accountability.

Before the pandemic, child neglect was still a major problem. The Department of Health and Human Services reported in 2018 that 3.5 million children and their families were investigated by child services. Anna, a child welfare case manager that I interviewed, told me about cases (while keeping the families anonymous) that involved neglect rather than abuse. Her mission was always reunification. However, Anna also discussed times when foster care would likely be permanent, like when she showed up for a mandatory unannounced visit and heard screaming. The children's mother was highly intoxicated along with an unknown man, and glass was seen smashed and broken all over the floor. Unfortunately, those kids had to be immediately placed into the New Jersey foster care system for their wellbeing and safety.

I used this case, and some other statistical and practical details of her job and routine to make sure my script, story, and characters were accurate as possible. When writing this, I think of my student who was too embarrassed to talk about his home life with his peers and other teachers. I remember he begged me to adopt him, even as a sophomore in college living out of a dorm room. He craved any sense of normality and stability. He is not alone. On an average day, police officers and child-welfare caseworkers move more than seven hundred children out of parental custody due to child neglect or abuse. My old student is just another one in the statistics that goes to school, plays sports, hangs out with friends, and then goes home to a social worker waiting to talk to him. This is a film for those who feel like it's taboo to talk about, for all the children and adults that grew up this way, and for what goes unnoticed every year.