

# Child Custody Eludes Couple

Even after injury in state foster-care system

BY RAYMOND RENDLEMAN  
THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Two-year-old Stephanie Kuntupis remained in Legacy Emanuel Hospital more than two months after suffering head injuries while in Oregon Department of Human Services' foster-care system.

Her birth parents, Monique Peals and Steven Kuntupis, lost custody after being arrested Jan. 31 for methamphetamine possession, but they have been in drug treatment since then.

The two contend that their progress in treatment and their eagerness to take care of their own child should merit reunification considering how much trouble DHS has had attracting foster parents. But after their child was seriously injured in state-sponsored foster care, they were horrified to see their child going to another set of foster parents.

DHS failed to interview the first set of parents or make sure that they took the required 10-hour training course before sending Stephanie to live with them, according to reports in the Oregonian.

The foster parents also had criminal histories, but DHS considered them suitable parents because their crimes did not include homicide or sexual abuse. Other records show they had many false names.

As DHS redoubles efforts to recruit foster parents, the newspaper found that Oregon's child-protec-



PHOTO BY RAYMOND RENDLEMAN/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER  
Monique Peals and Steven Kuntupis hold a picture of their two-year-old daughter Stephanie as they await her release from Legacy Emanuel Children's Hospital, more than two months after she suffered head injuries while in state-sponsored foster care.

tion agency often skips required monthly visits to foster parents due to lack of funds.

Stephanie's parents claim that their daughter's injury could have been avoided if the state had responded to a previous complaint regarding injuries to children under the foster couple's care.

The parents understand the child-protection agency's predicament, given its limited funding, but argue that it should loosen regulations in minor cases so resources can be left for parents truly unable or unwilling to care for their children.

Instead, the agency orchestrates a complex series of hoops for every parent that it determines to be a danger to a child. In the case of Stephanie's parents, the couple attempted to gain trust by follow-

ing specific procedures delineated for an outing that apparently became grounds for further restrictions.

"I'm not getting my daughter back because of a miscommunication," says Peals, who is African American. "I feel like my rights are being violated, because I've been staying clean and sober."

Both parents, especially the child's father who has Greek heritage, have begun to see the agency's practices as stemming from racial prejudice. The agency processes nearly three times as many African-American children as proportional to their numbers in Oregon.

"We just want justice for our daughter," says Kuntupis. "Even though we do everything right, they make us out to be villains."

# Latinos Stung in DMV Crackdown

Suspicious applicants are reported to police

(AP) — Workers in Oregon's Department of Motor Vehicles have begun calling police when applicants for driver's licenses have suspicious documents, rather than just turning them away.

The intent is to deter people that are trying to create fake identification from shopping among driver's license offices in search of a lax employee.

From June through August, 140 people were turned in — about 94 percent of them with Latino names, according to Driver and Motor Vehicle Services records obtained by the Oregonian newspaper.

In one case, a Clackamas County woman in the country legally on a visa was arrested, but later her birth certificate was found to be legitimate. And in another, it said, a woman in the country illegally presented her Mexican birth certificate and was arrested on forgery charges. Prosecutors later dropped both cases.

Reporting applicants with suspicious documents was one of the few alternatives for a division charged with providing valid identification but with few tools to curb fraud, said Lorna Youngs, administrator of the agency.

Oregon State Police and police in Portland, Beaverton and Albany, who have gotten many of the referrals, report 13 people have been convicted of crimes, and a dozen others await

prosecution.

Suspects have confessed to buying Social Security cards in Montana, Los Angeles and Hillsboro, police said. Dubious documents include Social Security cards, bank statements, consulate cards and out-of-state driver's licenses, as well as identification from Mexico, Brazil, El Salvador, Costa Rica and other countries.

"Perhaps a large portion of people that are offending with bogus documents happen to be Latinos," said Angel Lopez, attorney for the woman with valid papers in Clackamas County. "But it's equally plausible that Latinos are being ferreted out in the first place because clerks do not understand the validity of documents that seem strange and foreign."

David Simon, acting consul of the Mexican Consulate in Portland, said the consulate wants the state agency to rely on it to validate certain forms of identification before calling police.

"Before they take steps that affect people's lives, they should look at other solutions and have other methods to verify documents," he said.

Youngs said she does not know why so many of those suspected of fraudulent activity by DMV employees appear to be Latino.

"If that is an accusation people could level, we would want to address it because that was the last thing that was intended," she said.



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- 12p.m. – 12:20 p.m. Introduction
- 12:20 p.m. – 1:30 p.m. Keynote Address by Dr. Gaston & Dr. Porter and Lunch

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