

## Do We Need Journalists to Reform Child Welfare?

Good journalists deliver objective reports that we can rely on. They quickly grasp topics that others have worked on for years to assemble fact-based, informative stories.

This week for example [Star Tribune editorial page writer D.J. Tice](#) reminded us that many of the reforms recommended by the 2015 Governor's Child Protection Task Force have been rejected by Minnesota child welfare managers, but pointed hopefully to the recent state Supreme Court ruling on the [Eric Dean case](#), which finally placed some limits on risky practices by caseworkers and counties.

Previously, KSTP reporter [Eric Rasmussen](#) and former Trib/current KARE 11 reporter [Brandon Stahl](#) helped maintain public awareness that children are being killed by overly parent-centered child protection practices.

Without these journalists child welfare reform would have disappeared as a public policy issue. We appreciate their work, and they deserve our support.

## Podcast Narrative

What I wanted to explore in today's podcast is what is the role of journalists in society generally and more specifically in helping to publicize issues related to government reforms which in the case of Safe Passage for Children means child welfare reforms.

It is no secret that journalists are often held in low esteem by the public, as is true with numerous professions, politicians for example. But today I want to stick up for journalists - not all of them of course, certainly not people who call themselves journalists but are merely using the airways to spread their political points of view. I'm talking about traditional, professional journalism and I want to make two points about the field.

First it has been difficult for us to keep child welfare reforms on the public-policy radar but to the extent we have been able to do that it's in no small part because of reporters in the print and electronic media who keep coming back to us and to the stories that we think are important.

The ones mentioned in the article are first, and this is kind of in chronological order, Brandon Stahl who is currently with KARE 11 news but who as a Star Tribune reporter did a major investigative piece in 2013 and 2014 where he profiled 53 children were killed despite being known to child protection, including 4-year old Eric Dean who was brutally murdered by his stepmother, and who became the poster child for reform. We have talked at length about this elsewhere but in brief Stahl's reporting prompted then Governor Mark Dayton to set up a task force in 2015 and that in turn produced significant improvements that are still having a positive impact today. Stahl was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize for this work and he should've gotten it.

The second reporter I mentioned is Eric Rasmussen at KSTP-Channel Five News. He has covered a number of child welfare related stories including most recently an excellent piece of in-depth investigation about a little girl named Autumn Hallow who was tortured to death over a period of seven months right under the noses of Stearns County Child protection and the Family

Court, and despite being reported to the Elk River Police Department 31 times including neighbors who shared with the police recordings of her screams. As I said, Eric spent over a year investigating this story and waded through tons of bureaucratic barriers and witnesses who did not want to go on the record.

I want to talk at more length in a moment about the work that DJ Tice did this week because that is the subject of today's blog, but first let me get to my second point which is that despite all the horror stories you may have heard I personally have never been quote "burned" by a reporter, not in my 30 years in Minnesota at least, and by burned I mean having the reporter either misquote me in a way that causes some damage or to quote something that I had asked and she wore he agreed would be off the record.

Journalists today have pretty high standards of integrity. For example they have to double source their information, meaning that if it's something from an individual as opposed to an official report for example, two people with direct knowledge of the situation have to be willing to go on the record with a statement or the information can't be used. So if the reporter talks with a number of different people who all say they knew a crucial fact, say who set fire to house the child was killed in, she can't use that information on the air or in print unless two of them are willing to go on the record publicly.

So back to this story that prompted this blog. It was an op-ed, by DJ Tice who is an editorial page editor for the Star Tribune.

I don't know all the members of the Star Tribune editorial page but my understanding is that Tice represents a moderate Republican point of view. That's important because anyone who is at the least bit moderate is likely to be ignored or worse by the current Republicans. One colleague of mine even suggested that no Republican member of the Minnesota legislature would be likely to even read his column, let alone give Tice's view any serious consideration.

Of course progressives are unlikely to read it either because he's identified as a Republican.

So that leaves an audience of everyone who still reads newspapers and is not on one or the other extreme end of the political spectrum.

This may not sound like enough people, but many influential and informed folks do read the editorial and op-ed pages of quality regional newspapers like the Boston Globe and the LA Times and the Trib, as well as regional papers for example in Rochester, Duluth, Grand Rapids and Mankato, and are also the people who still make many of the important decisions affecting their communities, for example business leaders who are involved in civic life and politicians who are somewhere in the mainstream, and certainly Governor, and while they may not agree with the Trib at least they are open enough to want to keep a finger on the community.

As an editorial page editor Tice writes an opinion piece every three weeks or so but it's been a heck of an opinion piece. It is always the lead column at the top of the page and is usually more than 1500 words long which is a veritable novel by journalistic standards. So Tice has plenty of time to explore whatever issue he's writing about. In this case what prompted him to write the article was a phone call from Kathleen Blatz whom he knew over the years since the time she promoted children's issues as the Chief Justice of the Minnesota Supreme Court.

She wanted to make sure that Tice was aware of the recent decision by the Minnesota Supreme Court in that famous case of Eric Dean, who was the poster child for Brandon Stahl's series. Dean was a four-year-old who was brutally murdered by his father's girlfriend in 2012.

For an in-depth analysis of that court case and its potential impact you can look up our recent blog and podcast on the topic on our website at [safepassageforchildren.org](http://safepassageforchildren.org). But briefly the Supreme Court lowered the threshold for suing a caseworker and by extension the county with from something like intentional and malicious endangerment of a child to gross negligence. Those are my non-legal layperson's terms but I think they capture the gist, and you can read more legal language in that podcast.

The headline for Tice's column is "**Minnesota is still not saving its children.**" and the subhead is "State Supreme Court ruling brings a reminder that too little in child protection has changed." That's what I'm talking about!! That is the message that we are trying to keep in front of the public and in front of policymakers, and this journalist did that. Early on he states "... how cruelly, and for how long, (will) children be allowed to be abused, beaten, and neglected in our midst before someone puts a stop to it." And he goes on to explore why the Supreme Court decision is important.

Now in this court case both the District Court and the Appellate court stood squarely on the side of the caseworkers and the county. And historically there hasn't been any decision of this nature that favors children by the state Supreme Court or even the United States federal courts. So it's an interesting side question to ask why now does the state Supreme Court take a pro child position, or at least a position that balances the interests of the child with those of the county? We don't know for fact but it could be because there are two recent additions to the state Supreme Court who have direct knowledge of child welfare issues and who may have shifted the balance. One is Justice Paul Theissen who wrote the unanimous opinion. He was previously Speaker of the House in the Minnesota legislature and was in that role when many of these child welfare reforms were front and center in 2015. The other, newer justice is Ann McKeig who previously served as a District Court judge in Hennepin County, and has long been a visible public champion for children.

In wrapping up his column Tice acknowledges that child protection decisions are difficult and says "The authority to come between a parent and child is a fearsome governmental power that must be wielded with care. Racial disparities that sadly appear in child protection cases, as in so many other measures of social well-being, complicate the issues." Amen to all that.

"But" he says, "children simply cannot stand up for themselves". And he hopes that the state Supreme Court's new ruling offers an opportunity to reconsider the balance between making parents comfortable and protecting children.

Tice's column is like a booster shot that allows us to prolong the period of time that we can keep child welfare reform visible to the public and to policy makers. His work and that of the other journalists we mentioned keep children's perils on the hearts and minds of people a little longer,

it legitimizes child welfare reform as an important public policy issue and also as a mainstream problem that can't just be summarily dismissed by people on either end of the political spectrum.

So if you are raising a glass of holiday cheer this month, or making your year-end list of things to be grateful for, offer a toast or add a line to your list for the professional journalists who make up the majority, that is the mainstream part of the industry and who operate with integrity and high standards, and keep us from overlooking important issues we might otherwise lose track of.

Rich Gehrman

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