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Amid Images of Love and Starvation, a More Nuanced Picture

By LESLIE KAUFMAN and RICHARD LEZIN JONES

ver since Raymond and Vanessa Jackson were arrested on Oct. 24 on charges that they were starving their four adopted sons, Joyce Brown, a former neighbor, has been racking her brain. "You try to remember things that were said, things you saw. Did I miss something?" she asks.

But try as she might, Ms. Brown cannot come up with any evidence that would reconcile the accusations against the couple in the Camden County, N.J., lockup with the close-knit, religious family she thought she knew. "There seems to be two pictures," she said. "There's the loving one that you see in the family photograph. Then there's this new one. They just don't go together."

In the past week, Ms. Brown has been one of dozens of people searching their consciences, and coming up with an ambiguous picture of parents who so painfully failed their children that 19-year-old Bruce Jackson weighed 45 pounds. According to the authorities, the boys were fed a meager diet that included pancake batter, and they ate wallboard and insulation to try to sate their hunger.

Yet even after days of reflection and ugly allegations from law officials, friends of the Jacksons and members of their church stand behind the parents as caring people doing their best with troubled children. Renee Jackson, 29, the oldest child of Raymond and Vanessa, said the boys had attended schools and were fed an appropriate diet.

And contrary to what the Camden County prosecutor has led the public to believe, union representatives for the social workers say, at least one child in the house had a compulsive eating disorder, pica, that might have compelled him to eat nonfood items like wallboard. Officials of the State Division of Youth and Family Services, however, strenuously deny this last point.

But the picture that is emerging is more nuanced, eccentric and confusing than the caricature of negligent or uncaring parents leaving terribly abused children in their wake. Narrowly drawn laws and an overweighted bureaucracy allowed the Jacksons, for whatever reason, to raise horribly malnourished children for years with no oversight or outside help.

The family existed in a system in which state adoption law allowed the couple to receive \$30,000 in annual stipends for doing little more than writing a letter certifying that their adopted children were still in their home.

Similarly, although the Jacksons said the children were being schooled at home, New Jersey law demands no proof that home-schooled children are receiving an education — not even annual tests or evidence that they are reading books or doing schoolwork.

And, the tricky task of evaluating the Jacksons, through the tools that were allowable, fell to a 29-year-old woman in her first full year as a social worker. She came from an office that was suspended in 2002 for failing to do adequate adoption investigations, and she herself had nearly triple the number of cases that she should have had. Perhaps as a result, even the most basic questions were not asked.

"I am not making excuses," said Paul Alexander, assistant to the president of the union, Local 1034 of the Communications Workers of America, that is helping to advocate for the nine state child welfare workers terminated for their involvement with the Jackson case, "but this is a woman who was doing double duty. If she had had more time maybe she could have fleshed out these problems."

Much remains unclear about life in the three-story gold-colored house at 318 White Horse Pike that has been the Jacksons' home for seven years. But already it is becoming clear that the house with the perky plastic tulips in the flower bed did not easily give up its secrets to the glancing eye.

Hard against Route 130 on the western edge of Collingswood, the house is part of a small cluster of private homes in a section of this working-class town that is more commercial than residential.

Hidden Behind the Blinds

Even on the sunniest, warmest days, a neighbor, Peter DiMattia, recalled, the Jacksons always seemed to have the blinds and drapes closed.

Inside, by all accounts, their home was busy and packed, with four bedrooms on the second floor and a boys' dormitory on the third floor. Besides Raymond and Vanessa, two adult biological children lived there, along with six adopted children and a foster child. Among them were Bruce, the eldest of the adopted children, who prompted the police inquiry after neighbors found him rooting through the garbage at 2:30 a.m. on Oct. 10; Keith, 14; his biological brother, Tyrone, 10; and 9-year-old Michael.

The Jacksons also had adopted two girls, Keziah, 12, and Jacee, 5, and had been granted custody of a 10-year-old foster child, Breanna, whom they had sought to adopt. None of the girls were mistreated, according to the Camden prosecutor.

The boys stood out because of their sickly appearance, but friends and fellow churchgoers saw this very weakness as proof that the Jacksons seemed to be living the biblical admonition to care for children no one else wanted. It was a perception the Jacksons boldly nurtured.

"We knew that the family was taking in unwanted children," said Kathy Warfel, who attended Come Alive New Testament Church in Medford, N.J., with the Jacksons. "The little ones, if anyone asked about the little ones, they were told that the children had some fetal alcohol and crack baby syndromes, and that's why they would never grow."

Fellow churchgoers say that the Jacksons also turned to other churchgoers to share their own troubles. Chris Cascarella, 30, says that he has known Mr. Jackson for 10 years and that he remembers Mr. Jackson breaking the silence of a group prayer during an overnight retreat by the church's men's ministry in the past year. "He wept out loud and prayed for the troubled kids he had taken into his home," Mr. Cascarella said.

The family was also in financial distress and was \$9,000 behind in rent, although the Jacksons were responsible for paying only \$261 of the \$1,074 monthly fee, because of federal assistance.

It was, according to most accounts, a constricted existence, but even now church members describe most of the children as vital and joyous and do not see parents who abused their children.

Tim Heim, a church member, remembers sitting with the Jacksons at the church's Christmas buffet last year.

"They sat with me, and every single one of those kids ate," he said. "If I had seen a kid take a plate and not eat, I would have noticed."

He added: "The parents just love those kids."

Lost in the Shuffle

But not all signs of trouble could be easily explained away.

A neighbor, Mr. DiMattia, said that last summer he saw the boys cutting the lawn with a pair of garden shears. He lent them his lawn mower.

"I used to say, 'Is everything all right, guys?'" Mr. DiMattia recalled. "And they would answer, 'Yeah, Mr. Pete.' Everything was fine."

Mr. DiMattia did not act to report the Jacksons, in part, he says because he thought the state was keeping an eye on the family — he had, after all, seen the social worker's car parked in the driveway.

But the social worker, as it turns out, was detailed from the Southern Adoption Resource Center, one of the more troubled of the Division of Youth and Family Services' many troubled offices.

In early 2002, the office failed the agency's own internal licensing procedure. Nevertheless, it was allowed to keep operating temporarily. Among the six violations the office was cited for, according to documents that have been made available to The New York Times by Children's Rights Inc., a nonprofit advocacy group that sued New Jersey over the quality of its foster care system, was failure to "document that all members of the adopted family's household were interviewed" and failure to "conduct monthly home visits during the minimum six-month advisory period."

Not only was the Southern Adoption Resource Center frequently cited by the Bureau of Licensing, but the unit the Jackson family's caseworker was assigned to was operating at a handicap, according to Mr. Alexander of the union. He said that the unit, which was supposed to have five social workers, had recently lost two. Their cases were temporarily divided among the remaining three. "She was supposed to have 15," he said. "She had 38 officially, and probably she really had more than 40."

Of course, even a heavy caseload would not have erased her responsibility to report anything amiss in the Jackson household, but her narrowly defined mandate under New Jersey law makes it unclear that anything she saw crossed this line.

The caseworker's basic task was to oversee Breanna, the foster child the Jacksons were trying to make their seventh adopted child. In this situation, according to Andy Williams, a spokesman for the Division of Youth and Family Services, she would visit the child and all other family members, but she would not have routinely reviewed medical records for any other children in the home. Under New Jersey law, everyone in the family would have received a medical examination when the Jacksons were first approved as a foster family more than a decade ago. But once approved, the family did not have to see doctors again.

The caseworker did note during a June visit that Bruce suffered from "depression and never fully developed physically and mentally." At some point, the caseworker, who has been subpoenaed in connection with the investigation, will have to explain why she did not act further at this point to at least get him treatment or to report the family for suspicion of abuse. Officials from the division say, however, that she saw no reason to doubt the family's explanation that the child had an eating disorder.

Other caseworkers say that this is entirely believable and point out that she would not have had the boys' files to double-check whether this was true or not. The boys, after all, had been legally adopted and were therefore beyond the scrutiny of child welfare officials, as the couple's biological children were.

Under New Jersey law, the schools were not in a position to help either.

When the Jacksons first took Bruce in, for example, he was enrolled in special education classes. Soon after he was adopted in 1995, and legally theirs free of state supervision, the Jacksons began saying they were home-schooling him, though it remains unclear what kind of education, if any, he received at home. It was a pattern repeated with each boy but not with the girls.

As it turns out, New Jersey is one of 23 states requiring parents who wish to home-school to do no more than send letters of intent to their local school boards or do nothing at all. Beyond this letter, New Jersey does not require parents to file curriculum or to do follow-up testing to make sure their children are keeping pace with their peers as many states, including New York, do.

"If someone wants to home-school a child, they can just home-school them," said Richard Vespucci, a spokesman for the New Jersey Department of Education. "It is a matter between the family and the local school board." The same hands-off policies apply for children with learning disabilities and handicaps, even if parents have no training for dealing with students with special needs.

"In this case it is a shame," said Jess McDonald, co-director of Fostering Results, a nonprofit advocacy group for foster children, and former director of the Illinois Department of Children of Family Services. "Education is the one universal system that could have been a check on these kids."