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Kidnap or molest a child, go to jail forever; kill a child, face execution!

by **Gil Villagrán**, MSW

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The Missouri kidnapping of Shawn Hornbeck, an eleven-year-old at the time of his abduction in 2002, and the subsequent kidnapping of Ben Ownby, age 13, one month ago by the same 41-year-old abductor must alert us all to the harsh reality of child abduction, child molest, and child murder. While most children live safely in their homes with their loving families, too many children do not reach adulthood without traumatic abuse and its lifelong consequences.

The harsh reality is that some children suffer life-threatening child abuse by parents or custodial adults (1500 children die each year from non-accidental injuries), and an estimated 100 children abducted every year. Several abduction cases each year catch the media spotlight, creating public outrage. One such case is of Steven Stayner, the seven-year-old from Modesto, kidnapped in 1972 and molested for 7 years before he escaped with a second kidnapped five-year old; Adam Walsh, age 6, from Florida, beheaded; Polly Klass, age 12, from Petaluma, taken from her very bed and killed; Elizabeth Smart, age 14, from Salt Lake City, taken at gunpoint for sex slavery. But there are hundreds if not thousands more children who have been kidnapped by known and unknown assailants, or who vanished, never to be found. Families are left a lifetime of remorse for having “lost” their own child at the playground, the mall, the school bus, their very own home.

Children not killed may be held captive for years in soundproof cages, or the very apartment next door. Abductors may use weapons to threaten a child into compliance, or use manipulative psychological coercion—such as, “if you run away, I will kill you and/or your family” or “your family doesn’t want you anymore.”

Children are kidnapped for the sexual gratification of a highly dysfunctional adult. Just two weeks ago Dean Schwartzmiller, age 64, from San Jose, was sentenced to 152 years in prison for molesting as many as 300 children. Two 12-year old cousins were his most recent victims, who he invited to his home, showered them with toys and video games while he molested them. His other 300 victims are identified by first name and last initial in extensive journals found in his home, 1500 pages in all, include nude

photographs of boys. That such a child predator lives in our community is frightening, and there are hundreds of paroled pedophiles in San Jose. Further outrage is that Schwartzmiller had already been arrested in eight states, on more than 80 counts of child molest of at least 13 children in the last 35 years! He has been convicted of sex crimes in at least four cases in other states, and had actually been incarcerated. Yet either his charges were dropped, he was found not guilty, or he was released from prison on appeal or parole.

It is critical to realize that every one of his 300 victims was forever traumatized by the molest. Victims often feel it is their fault for having let it happen to them, even though they may have been so young that they barely knew what was being done to them. Substance abuse and suicide ideation is not uncommon for victims, as well as for their parents, thinking that they failed to protect their child. Most victims grow up and manage to resolve their trauma as best they can. Many obtain counseling which always helps to get beyond their victim identification, and go on to live happy and successful lives. However, a small percent, more likely boys, grow up to become pedophiles themselves, re-enacting their trauma, but now in control of others, as predators to new child victims.

All sexual assaults are violent crimes, but the sexual assault of a child is particularly vile because the very inherent innocence of the child is stolen forever. As a social worker with more than 20 years of experience investigating child abuse, including hundreds of cases of sexual molest and exploitation of children, and some child abduction cases, I advocate for lifetime incarceration of anyone who kidnaps a child for the purpose of child molestation, and execution of anyone who murders a child.

What can the public do to protect all children? BE VIGILANT. Shawn Hornbeck, the Missouri child, spent four years living in an apartment building with his abductor who never missed work as manager of a pizza parlor. Shawn was alone most days riding his bike around town or playing video games at "home." He never went to school in those four years. Neighbors now report hearing screaming, banging and whimpering at night. He had an email account, went to the mall, had friends over and went to visit friends homes, even had a girlfriend who he took to a dance. Some neighbors even thought he looked like the boy in the posters with his name, and on the tv news reports on the anniversaries of his abduction. Yet no one ever called the police, the

school district, child protective services. One call to any of the above would have brought an official to inquire about this boy who suddenly appeared with the man who abducted him and certainly used him for sexual gratification. The police or social workers or school officials would have asked to see a birth certificate, and the truth would have come out. Shawn would be returned to his home, and the pedophile abductor to prison. But no one called 911! Please accept the responsibility that we are all our children's keepers.

Many of my editorials, essays, news articles are posted at www.indybay.org
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