

Baby, adoptive parents dead

The social roots of a Detroit tragedy

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Leonard and Carissa Columbus, a recently married couple living in suburban Detroit, were unable to have children but desperately wanted to be parents. Sara Vanpopering, the 19-year-old mother of two small children, found single parenthood difficult and was seriously considering giving up her children for adoption. One might have thought the intersection of these lives could result in a happy ending for all involved. Instead, it ended horrifically earlier this month with the death of six-month-old Tyler Vanpopering and the suicide of the Columbus couple.

The Southgate, Michigan, community and Downriver Detroit area were shocked and saddened by the deaths. Coverage in local newspapers and television broadcasts provided the standard non-explanation for such a social tragedy: inexplicable—how could it happen?—we'll never understand. Southgate Police Chief Larry Hall described it as “a tragedy beyond belief.”

But delving into the set of circumstances surrounding the case, a picture begins to emerge of lives wrought with stress, economic hardship, and lack of social support. These conditions—which resulted in personal tragedy for the Vanpopering and Columbus families—affect the daily lives of many parents, who find that desire to be good mothers and fathers, and love for their children, are often not enough to navigate the cruel conditions of contemporary American society.

Leonard Columbus, 35, married Carissa, 25, in May 2003. Though Leonard had a 10-year-old son from his previous marriage, the couple shared a strong desire to have children of their own. Carissa, a diabetic, had miscarried the last time the couple tried to conceive, and doctors told her she would be unable to carry a child to term.

Like other couples facing infertility, they felt that adoption or finding a surrogate mother were their only options. Adoption costs vary widely in the US, but fees through a private agency can range anywhere from \$4,000

to more than \$30,000. Although this varies by state, most public agency adoptions—though less expensive, costing from zero to \$2,500—only place children with special physical, mental, or emotional needs.

Those seeking infertility treatment also find the costs astronomical. A single in-vitro fertilization (IVF) attempt can cost as much as \$10,000, and IVF is rarely covered by medical insurance. Clearly, a wealthy couple has a much better chance of becoming the parents of a healthy baby.

The Columbuses, on the other hand, were struggling to make ends meet. Leonard was an assembly line worker at Ford Motor Company's Rouge plant in nearby Dearborn. Carissa was on disability from the same plant. Leonard Columbus told Southgate detectives that he was on the verge of filing bankruptcy. His car had recently been possessed. Under these financial conditions, a private-agency adoption was out of the question.

But costs are often reduced when a couple arranges on their own with a woman who is willing to give up her child for adoption, or be a surrogate mother. Kelly Klug told the *Detroit Free Press* that the Columbuses befriended her last July at the Applebee's restaurant in nearby Woodhaven, where she worked as a waitress, and eventually asked if she would be willing to serve as a surrogate. She declined, although she commented, “They seemed to be a very loving and devoted couple.”

Last September, the couple met 19-year-old Sara Vanpopering, the mother of six-month-old Tyler and year-and-a-half old daughter McKenzie, through a mutual friend. Like many young, single mothers, Sara had no support system outside of her immediate family. There is no government-sponsored day care for infants and young children in the US. According to some estimates, parents can expect to pay upwards of \$800 a month to keep two children in a licensed day care facility, with costs much higher in major metropolitan areas. Non-licensed centers often provide substandard care.

With two small children to care for, Sara was forced to

quit high school but wanted to re-enroll. She began to frequently ask the Columbus couple to babysit her two children, and the couple expressed a desire to adopt them. Sara told the *Free Press*, “I was unable to take care of them at the time. I couldn’t find a job.” She said she had been planning to give her children up for adoption to the couple. Sara’s brother Mark commented, “[Sara] was too young to have kids. She thought they [the Columbuses] were financially secure and everything, and she’d be able to see them and stuff.”

Leonard and Carissa Columbus were caring for Tyler and McKenzie over Easter weekend. On the evening of Sunday, April 11, they brought Tyler to the emergency room of Wyandotte Hospital, saying he had had a seizure and stopped breathing while they ate at a Toledo, Ohio, restaurant, and they had been unable to resuscitate him.

But when Tyler was airlifted to University of Michigan Hospital in Ann Arbor, doctors determined that his condition was consistent with injuries suffered with Shaken Baby Syndrome (SBS). They discovered two cranial bleeds, one old and one recent, which in SBS cases usually occur beneath the outer membrane that covers the spinal cord and brain.

Hospital officials told police that the new injury almost certainly happened within two hours before his admission to the hospital on April 11. As Tyler had been in the Columbuses care during this period, all indications led investigators to believe that one of them was responsible. Tyler died three days later, on April 14. Although the couple weren’t immediately charged in the baby’s death, they were told by investigators that they should make themselves available for questioning.

Without question, baby shaking is an aggressive act carried out by an adult against a defenseless child. If Leonard or Carissa Columbus was responsible for Tyler’s death, it was a violent crime, and thousands of young children have fallen victim to such abuse. Although figures are difficult to determine, the National Center on Shaken Baby Syndrome estimates that there are anywhere from 600 to 1,400 SBS cases per year in the US. It is generally recognized as the most common cause of mortality and is responsible for the most long-term disability in infants and young children due to physical abuse.

An adult forcefully shaking an infant for as little as 20 seconds—perhaps 40-50 shakes—can cause fatal injuries, including brain and retinal hemorrhaging. A baby’s unrelenting crying is the most common trigger for a caretaker to shake a baby uncontrollably. Young fathers

are most likely to inflict SBS, out of inexperience and frustration at being unable to calm the child. Poorly trained daycare providers are also responsible for a substantial number of cases.

However, many parents are unaware that shaking a baby or young child is so deadly. There are no government advisories on SBS, and in the vast majority of cases, mothers leave the hospital after childbirth with no information on SBS, or on how to cope with the stress of being alone with a crying infant. As is the case with many social problems in the US, education on Shaken Baby Syndrome is left to private advocacy groups with limited resources.

Although details of the events leading up to Tyler Vanpoering’s death will never be known fully, Leonard or Carissa Columbus were in all likelihood responsible. But if one or both of them were to blame for inflicting the baby’s deadly injury, they probably had no intention of harming the child. Most likely devastated and wracked by guilt, they did not respond to police attempts to reach them.

On Saturday, April 17, Southgate police broke into their home and found the two dead in their garage of carbon monoxide poisoning. Carissa Columbus had left a note that read in part: “No one here would ever hurt Sara’s kids. Please make sure our dogs are taken care of.” Their next-door neighbor told the *Free Press*: “I’ve never seen them be hostile toward the children or hostile toward each other.”

The heartbreaking outcome for all those involved in this terrible chain of events is an indictment of a social system that fails to provide the most minimal social and financial assistance to young parents and working families. Individuals are left to deal on their own with difficulties that are in fact social problems, and authorities are likely to step in only after catastrophe has struck.

An infant dead, a victim of Shaken Baby Syndrome; his prospective adoptive parents, a double suicide—such tragedies are “beyond belief” only to the extent that one’s eyes are closed to the social crisis gripping all facets of American life.



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