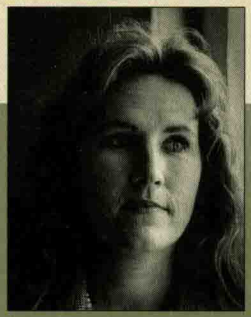
FOUR CHILD WELFARE WORKERS IN CALIFORNIA



In A Day's Work

By Marjorie Beggs

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SOCIAL WORKERS – CALIFORNIA CHAPTER

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Child welfare workers in public agencies have desks, but they don't sit at them much. Instead, they spend their days in strangers' homes checking out allegations of abuse, in courtrooms presenting their cases, in foster homes monitoring how children are faring, in homes of families that have been reunited after months of court-ordered separation. To get to those places, the workers log hours upon hours in cars. Their work often is urgent, so they have car phones and – clipped to lapels or belt buckles or secreted in pockets – the ubiquitous beepers, like extra sense organs.

Of this country's 603,000 social workers, about 84,000 work in child welfare, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. The public has some notion of what social work entails – doing good, lending a hand, trying to help the needy – but the perception of child welfare workers is considerably darker.

Newspapers splash headlines about children who are abused or die because a child welfare worker decided to let them stay with their parents, or who are abused or die at the hands of foster parents after their worker decided to take them from their parents for their protection. Sometimes a story throws a bone to the workers, describing how they're expected to turn out reams of mandated reports on a dime and still find time to regularly visit the 80 children in their caseloads. More often, the media rile readers with stories of "mistakes" and quotes from angry citizens, then conclude with statements such as this, from an article in the *San Francisco Chronicle* about charges of foster care system mismanagement: "Department officials sat passively, later admitting there had been some mistakes."

In 1994, more than four million incidents of child abuse were reported nationally, of which one million were substantiated by Child Protective Services. The much-maligned public child welfare system, responsible for keeping these children from further harm, has trouble keeping workers, too. Turnover among child welfare workers, though unquantified, is desperately high, according to most public agencies.

"Admittedly," states the 1987 Encyclopedia of Social Work, "child welfare social work makes a number of egregious demands on the emotional life of its practitioners. Handling intractable situations with limited resources, in contact with demanding, often unwilling, clients, and having responsibility for significant aspects of children's lives can erode the idealism, conviction, and enthusiasm of many workers."

This book is about the professional pleasures and pains of four workers who haven't turned over and out of child welfare. Clara Zamora, an emergency response worker in San Francisco's sexual abuse unit; Susan Sontag-Crisanto, a court dependency unit worker from Riverside County in Southern California; David Weinreich, a Los Angeles County permanency planning worker; and Barbara Williams, a court officer from Contra Costa County in Northern California. They are among the survivors whom the system didn't "suck up, spit out and replace with a new worker," according to Sontag-Crisanto. They also were among 28 California workers who were nominated by their supervisors to participate in a study of public child welfare workers who not only survive but truly excel at their jobs.

Though they have different jobs and work in vastly different environments – urban San Francisco, rural Riverside County, immense Los Angeles, suburban Contra Costa County – their experiences are strikingly similar and will ring familiar to workers around the country. The four also share something intangible, a common edge in their otherwise diverse personalities, a note that keeps sounding among the details of their personal and work lives. All believe in the work they're doing. They stand their ground when they feel their work is being compromised.

Asked if she was surprised that she'd been nominated for the study, Sontag-Crisanto said, "Well, yes and no. I work very hard, but I'm kind of rebellious and tend to get in trouble." That's the edge.

METHODOLOGY

In 1991, San Francisco-based Zellerbach Family Fund approached the California chapter of the National Association of Social Workers and offered to support a study that would recognize child welfare workers' accomplishments and portray their work realistically for people who might be considering a career in the field. NASW accepted the grant and hired Wilbur Finch, associate professor at the University of Southern California School of Social Work, to design and conduct the study.

Finch asked 16 county Social Services departments to nominate successful full-time child welfare workers who had master's degrees in social work and had been on the job at least three years. He received 28 nominations and sent those workers a detailed job evaluation and job satisfaction questionnaire.

From the returns, Finch winnowed the participants to the 18 who were most satisfied with their jobs. They ranged in age from 26 to 66; four of the 18 were of color; three were men. Finch did a final culling that brought the number of finalists to 12 workers, whom he invited to participate in daylong focus groups that he and his project assistant, Dennis Durby, conducted. Five workers attended the Northern California focus group in Berkeley and three attended the Southern California group in Los Angeles.

Of the four workers profiled in this book, two participated in the focus groups and two were unable to attend. During 1993 and 1994, these four were interviewed at

length and followed around rather relentlessly, but the focus group transcriptions remained a rich source of illuminating and sometimes entertaining information about child welfare workers' experiences.

When Finch asked the Southern California focus group members whom they looked to for help in making on-the-spot decisions about removing a child from a home, Carolyn Karnauskas, an emergency response worker from Santa Barbara County, said she often had to depend on her own experience.

To illustrate her point, she described a typical situation:

"You go out on what you think is a nothing call, and you find mom totally wasted and two little kids in urine-soaked diapers, the house a disaster, the front door wide open, no one supervising the kids, okay? Mom doesn't have a phone, so you go down to a pay phone and call law enforcement. They come, and it's this guy who's probably just out of training and doesn't know what to do.

"So you explain the situation as you see it, and he talks to his partner and then calls his boss and then he says to you, 'Well, whatever you want to do.' So I say, 'Will you please fill out this booking sheet and detain these kids and release them to me?' And he says with a laugh, 'Okay, how do I do it?' You say, 'Never mind. I'll fill it out. Just sign here.'

"When I'm ready to take the kids, I tell him, 'If you want to talk to mom, she's over in that corner. By the way, if she wakes up, tell her that the kids are gone.' We're supposed to wake them up and tell them what we're doing, inform the parents if they're there, or leave a note telling where the kids are going.

"Sometimes the opposite will occur. A uniformed officer and his partner call their boss, who comes to the scene, and then two more cars arrive and then two more. I've had as many as 17 cops in front of the house on a general neglect call. And I'm saying, 'What's this? Slow day, huh boys?'"

When Dennis Durby asked the Northern California focus group members what they would tell new child welfare workers eager to succeed, they responded in the spirit of thoughtfulness and levity that characterized all the study participants.

Inger Acking: "Learn to listen."

Ann Marie Clark: "Keep an open mind."

Shirley Briggs: "Keep your mouth shut."

Ann Marie Clark: "Don't place your values on someone else, and keep the parent informed about how their child is doing."

Shirley Briggs: "Seek as much change as you can."

Ann Marie Clark: "Get as much money as you can for your client."

Shirley Briggs: "Get as much money as you can for yourself."

Rebecca Sowder: "Yes, that makes a difference so you feel better about yourself."

Inger Acking: "Don't tell the client what to do. Ask what he or she wants."

Clara Zamora: "Use the base of social work. Start where your client is."

A BRIEF HISTORY OF CHILD WELFARE

Helping families protect their children from harm is fundamental to child welfare social work. The "helping" concept, a 20th century phenomenon, emerged out of a human history that has not always looked kindly on children. Many cultures accepted as the norm and even encouraged practices that we call child abuse – infanticide, abandonment, exploitation, foot and head binding, swaddling, skin salting (to toughen infants' skin against the elements). Only at this relatively late date has Western society redefined these acts as unacceptable and passed laws to try to prevent them.

During the 1860s and 1870s, new scientific awareness of how childhood experiences shape adult life coincided with Western society's new reverence for childhood and its recognition that children are valuable resources, worth protecting. The result was the rise of benevolent organizations such as the New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. By the end of the 19th century, more than 200 such private agencies were operating in the country.

In California, an early legal attempt to deal with child abuse was a 1911 mothers' pension law, which allowed counties to provide poor mothers with funds to care for their children and, it was hoped, reduce a range of ills from child malnutrition to cruelty and abandonment. Most states had similar laws on their books by the time Congress passed the Social Security Act of 1935, which included Title IV-A, Aid to Families with Dependent Children. AFDC replaced state mothers' pensions with a combination of federal, state and local funds.

The Social Security Act also required state and local governments to provide child welfare services under Title V. By the 1940s, the private agencies that had been sheltering abused children began ceding that responsibility to the newly established public child welfare agencies.

A flurry of federal legislative activity began in the 1960s: Four amendments to the Social Security Act assured funding for foster care and for programs to prevent or remedy abuse and neglect. These were followed by five laws aimed at reversing children's deteriorating chances of growing up healthy in mind and body – the Child Abuse Neglect Prevention and Treatment Act, the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, the Indian Child Welfare Act, and the 1980 Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act, PL-96-272.

PL 96-272 was the first major child welfare reform legislation since the Social Security Act amendments. It standardized public practices and programs across the country in hopes of stemming the tidal wave of child abuse that had begun in the late 1970s, a result of escalating drug use, especially of crack cocaine, and growing poverty, unemployment and family disintegration. In 1982, California enacted SB 14, which brought California into compliance with PL 96-272 and mandated counties to assign child welfare workers to one of four service

programs – emergency response, family maintenance, family reunification or permanency planning.

Emergency response, or ER, provides round-the-clock response to reports of neglect, abuse or exploitation. If the child welfare worker (or, in a few counties, a police or probation officer) determines that a minor cannot remain safely at home, the worker removes the child to shelter care and, within 48 hours, must file a petition with the Juvenile Court requesting that the child be declared a dependent of the court. Within 24 hours of the petition filing, the court holds a detention hearing at which the judge must decide whether the petition's allegations justify keeping the child in shelter or the child should be returned home and the case dismissed.

The judge also may decide to return the child if the family agrees to participate in the family maintenance program. Services in this program include counseling, parenting skills training, teaching and demonstration homemaking, transportation, respite care.

If the Juvenile Court judge decides the child should stay in shelter care, a dispositional hearing to decide whether the child should be made a dependent must be held within 45 days days (the state standard, but some counties have more stringent schedules).

If declared a dependent, the child may be placed in foster care or returned home with mandatory family maintenance services. The family of a child placed in foster care receives services from the family reunification program: counseling, parenting skills training, teaching and demonstration homemaking, transportation. Workers provide the services for up to 18 months. Within 12 months of the disposition, or 18 months of the detention hearing, the court schedules a permanency planning hearing to decide whether the child's worker should pursue reunification, adoption, guardianship or long-term placement in foster care or with relatives. The goal of permanent placement is to find the most family-like, stable setting for the child.

While the four service programs still exist in many counties, just as many counties have kept the four service category names but reorganized their departments into simpler divisions, such as child protective services and family services.

The newest effort in the child welfare field aims at reducing out-of-home placements. The 1993 Family Preservation and Family Support Services Act funds programs that stress intensive prevention and early intervention services. The goal is to keep families approaching crisis from breaking apart and reduce the country's $1 billion annual tab for foster care.

Despite the creation of new service programs and continuing stabs at pilot programs to improve children's outlook, the statistics are discouraging. Reports of abuse and neglect increased 63% from 1985 to 1994. Nationwide, 16 of every 1,000 U.S. children are victims of maltreatment. California leads the nation in abuse reports, averaging more than one a minute, every day. That's the reality facing child welfare workers.

CHILD WELFARE TODAY

Though the proportion of children in the total population has been dropping since the 1950s, the number of children in public child welfare systems keeps rising. In June 1984, 34,000 children were in foster care in California. Eleven years later, the number had skyrocketed to 92,900. In June 1995, county emergency response units investigated 33,900 possible abuse cases, and family maintenance workers were supervising 29,000 children living at home. In all, in that month, 155,800 children were part of the California "system."

Economic and social trends explain part of the reason for these huge numbers: more children living in poverty and in single-parent families, more children born to teen-age mothers, more homeless families, more mothers in the work force, more substance abuse and AIDS among parents.

The field also is changing. The number and complexity of mandated reports is on the rise, as is the role of the courts in evaluating decisions. More court involvement increases the number of legal challenges – by attorneys, advocates for children and parents – and that lengthens a worker's time on a case as well as how long a family is tethered to the child welfare system.

Workers' responsibilities are changing, too. Instead of serving clients directly, they're often "managing" services the county purchases from other providers. Unfortunately, as several of the workers profiled in this book note, those resources now are drying up.

And there are other problems. According to the *Encyclopedia of Social Work*, the public child welfare field "enjoyed a special recognition and status as a highly professional sector of social work" during the 1950s and 1960s, but in the intervening years has "lost some of its elite status."

"Social work used to be an esteemed profession," agrees Connie Rinne, child welfare division manager of west Contra Costa County Children's Services, who got her M.S.W. at University of California, Berkeley, in 1957. Still, she's hopeful that it might regain some of its previous luster. "The work is so important to society and it's a good place to develop yourself as a person. It's a rich environment for getting a lot of personal satisfaction."

As we move toward the end of the century, there's evidence of renewed interest in the field and, perhaps, even renewed esteem for the profession. The Council on Social Work Education reports that the number of full-time M.S.W. students nationwide rose 34% between 1989 and 1993, from 15,777 to 21,063. And the number of master of social work degrees awarded increased 32%.

Part of the increase is due to a recent federal "reprofessionalization" program that is helping states boost enrollment in degree programs through stipends to students. In exchange, the students agree to work in the public sector for a specific amount of time. As of 1994, nine states were participating in the program.

In the California model, participating public child welfare agencies have to evaluate the effectiveness of their services with an

eye to serving clients better and retaining workers. In return, graduate social work programs have to shape their curricula to more accurately reflect the work their students will be expected to do.

Such practicality is a big change from what was coming across the classroom lectern 25 years ago. Carolyn Karnauskas, who got her M.S.W. in 1971, told the Southern California focus group members, "I believe child abuse was never mentioned or discussed and, therefore, didn't exist. There were no labels and no diagnoses, and a social worker wasn't allowed to even touch the psychiatric handbook because we weren't qualified to do that. I don't think I even learned that sexual abuse existed until years later. It was all individual and family counseling and group Gestalt. And none of us entertained the idea of a field placement in the child welfare department, let alone a job there."

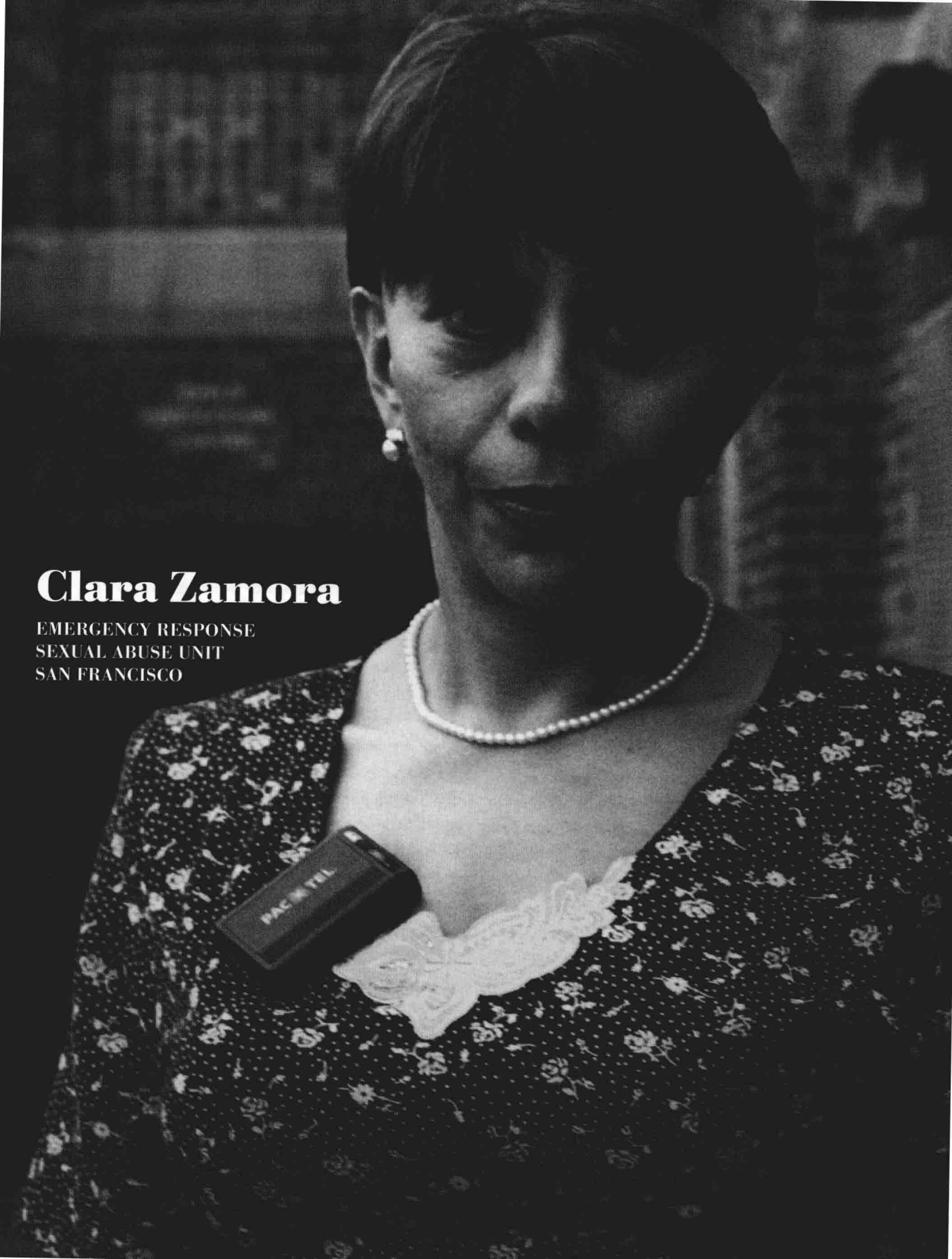
In the Northern California focus group, Ann Marie Clark, a reunification worker from San Francisco, said she was unprepared for the places she'd have to go into and for the resourcefulness she'd need to get out of them safely. "They didn't tell me about Geneva Towers and the Sunnydale (housing) Projects. They didn't tell me what it was going to be like when I go in to take this woman's baby away, or that I might have clients that try to attack me. I didn't learn about that at school. I learned on the job."

Social work programs are starting to prepare their students better, though school will never be a substitute for field experience. "Students often think you have to have all the answers, but you don't on the job," said Rebecca Sowder, an emergency response worker from Marin County. "When you go out, you have to learn to think on your feet, you have to listen to the client and go back and check resources, and you have to know that you can't fix everything. In graduate school, we sometimes come out thinking we can fix problems right away. The bottom line is you can't. Some you will never fix, and when you accept that, it's an easier job."

"OUR SUCCESSES"

Here are the stories of four workers who are in child welfare for the long haul. They share their personal backgrounds, their motivations for entering the field, details of the jobs they've done and are now doing, their approach to professional responsibilities, what they hate about their job, what they love.

Sometimes their stories shed an unflattering light on the child welfare system, but the stories also radiate hope because these are real people pursuing excellence in an incredibly demanding service field. As worker Amy Allison told the Southern California focus group, "If our failures can become public knowledge, why can't our successes?"



Clara Zamora

EMERGENCY RESPONSE
SEXUAL ABUSE UNIT
SAN FRANCISCO

TYPICAL DAY

"Nice cases do turn into nightmares"

Emergency response, sexual abuse unit. The words conjure a worker speeding toward a dangerous situation in deep night. Dark, dirty rooms. A sullen "perp" who clams up, denying everything. A traumatized child cowering in the corner.

It does happen that way sometimes. But today, a sunny, early spring day, Clara Zamora and police Officer Martha McDowell – out of uniform and seven months pregnant – are driving at a leisurely pace in an unmarked police car to interview a 17-year-old Latina who says her brother-in-law has been molesting her.

"She called the police a few hours ago, and they called us, but because she's older, this isn't as much of an emergency," Zamora says. "Still, we need to check it out because she's a minor and the perp is on site – I mean, she and the perpetrator, the brother-in-law, live in the same house." As in every field, child welfare has its jargon. Zamora, an eight-year veteran of the unit, works hard to keep it at a minimum with lay folk and uses none when she's with clients.

The location of the interview is a well-maintained brick school building. The girl, calm, self-possessed, beautiful, wearing perfectly applied makeup and fashionably baggy overalls, is called out of her TAPP class. That's the Teen-age Pregnancy and Parenting Project; the girl is four months pregnant with her second child.

Zamora and McDowell begin by asking the girl why she called the police. She says her brother-in-law always tries to touch and kiss her when they're alone. She seems afraid to say more. Keeping eye contact all the time, Zamora asks straight out: "What would you like to happen now?" The girl can't answer, even after patient prodding, so Zamora pulls out some of the stops and appeals to her, Latina to Latina. "We shouldn't keep secrets in our culture. If we don't say anything, the men may say you like it." The girl nods in understanding, looks down, still says nothing. "Maybe we should start by telling your mother what's going on," Zamora says.

That opens a chink in the girl's reserve and she unfolds her story: She's afraid he will force her. When no one else is home – mother, sister, or sister and brother-in-