

Citizen Heroes: A Salute to Civic Treasures

Easing a World of Hurt: A Well-Informed and Thorough Doctor Helps Children Suffering from Abuse

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Most of us wouldn't want to work in Dr. Cindy Christian's world. Oh, we would enthusiastically approve of her goal - protecting children from abuse.

But we wouldn't want to work in her world, where young ones have adult-sized medical histories of bruises, fractures and intimate invasions.

Dr. Christian, a 42-year-old native Long Islander, is director of the Child Abuse Program at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. She holds the hospital's endowed chair in the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (though the cause is as worthy as any, you won't find many such endowments around the country). She's co-director of Children's Hospital's Safe Place: the Center for Child Protection and Health, a comprehensive, multidisciplinary center for abused, neglected and foster children. She's a pediatrician who examines abused children in her Children's Hospital clinic. She is, in fact, a premier sleuth at diagnosing abuse. Her competence makes her a powerful ally of children in court proceedings.

Whew.

She's a teacher. She has taught children about the health of their bodies. She has taught thousands of lawyers, police officers, dentists and other doctors from the Philadelphia area and around the country how to spot child abuse. She is an assistant professor of pediatrics at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine. She has coauthored textbooks and is active on the state and national levels in abuse prevention.

Most important, she makes this region's victimized children smile and feel respected - a heroic achievement indeed. The darnedest thing is, they make her smile, too.

"It's easy to be upbeat because the kids are upbeat," Dr. Christian said. "The patients are so terrific even though they have been through terrible things... . Most days, I have fun."

This is fun?

At 9 a.m. on a recent weekday, Dr. Christian is in the waiting room of Courtroom B at Philadelphia Family Court on Vine Street, reviewing medical records of a 16-month-old boy. She's testifying at a preliminary criminal hearing for the people (not family members) accused of the abuse. X-rays show multiple fractures. Unlike most babies who stop crying when they are picked up, Dr. Christian says, this baby started crying. The baby, Dr. Christian concludes from all the medical evidence, was in enormous, unnatural pain caused by abuse - which she confidently testifies to in court.

The child's mother says Dr. Christian helped her and her son through very difficult times. To her son, who was about 5-months-old when he suffered his first injury, Dr. Christian gave caring, professional attention.

To the stressed-out mother, Dr. Christian gave unlimited doses of expertise and patience, repeating explanations and answering questions.

"She made me feel really comfortable," the mother says. "She knew exactly what was going on... She reassured me through the whole thing."

Most people who work in child abuse don't stay in it for long, said Mimi Rose, who was chief of the Philadelphia District Attorney Office's Family Violence and Sexual Assault Unit for 11 years.

That's part of what makes Dr. Christian, who has worked in it for more than a decade, so remarkable, Ms. Rose said. But it's not all that makes her remarkable.

"She's smart, clear and focused," Ms. Rose said.

And she's skilled in interpreting and explaining injuries, which is especially important when the victims are so young they don't yet talk. In those cases, Ms. Rose said, "so much depends on the doctor's ability to explain an injury."

Dr. Christian gains older children's trust, maybe by complimenting them on the pom-poms in their hair or their sparkly shoes. If children are nervous when she pulls on her examination gloves, she'll tell them she's merely wearing "cookie checkers." After a few seconds of examining their abdomen, she'll look up and say, "My gloves tell me you've been drinking juice" - which Dr. Christian knows is a safe bet since almost all kids drink juice.

"They look up mesmerized," Dr. Christian said.

In court proceedings, Dr. Christian mesmerizes judges, lawyers and juries by explaining to them how she got "underneath a secret," be it emotional or physical, said Frank Cervone, executive director of the Support Center for Child Advocates, a volunteer lawyers program for abused children in Philadelphia.

"When she feels she's right, there's no getting around her," Mr. Cervone said. "It's an informed conviction.

"She's studied and thorough, but she never comes off as an egghead. She teaches in such clear, compelling language."

Dr. Christian is teaching an 11-year-old - in her clinic because of a history of sexual abuse - about the menstruation the girl soon will experience.

"I'm going to be really upfront so you understand things," she tells the girl and her stepmother as she takes out a blank piece of paper. "I'm a pretty good doctor, but I'm a really bad drawer." Still, Dr. Christian's sketch and explanation of reproduction and what causes menstruation make the lesson clear.

Dr. Christian spends another three hours seeing patients and talking to the medical personnel working with her.

It's after 5:30 by the time Dr. Christian finally returns to her office. She connects to an Internet site that airs the music of her passion and of her piano-playing - Sinatra, Horne, Sammy Davis Jr., Gershwin - and keeps working.

Thankfully, one of Dr. Christian's biggest fans is her husband, Peter. She calls him "very supportive." He calls her "amazing" and a "do-aholic." She's in perpetual motion, weekday or weekend, but leaves her job at the office so they can spend undistracted time with their two daughters, 13-year-old Allison and 9-year-old Carly.

One of the few times Dr. Christian became emotional on the job was right after Allison was born. The doctor had just returned to work from maternity leave and saw a baby in the intensive-care unit who was about the same age and looked like Allison.

"A clean, fair baby - with multiple injuries. I just cried," Dr. Christian said.

Occasionally, she indulges in a very hypothetical game: What if she retired from medicine tomorrow? She might be able to "get a job in a cheap lounge" playing piano. But the day after tomorrow, she would be back to work because she's happy with her life.

Thank goodness Cindy Christian loves her world.