

# Camera



**A SPOONFUL  
OF SUGAR**

**COLLEGE PREVIEW: BUFFS TO  
'D'-PEND ON SENIORS** Special section, Inside

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Guest commentary

## An angel for us all

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Last week, justice was done in Courtroom 16 of Denver's City and County Building. After three weeks of painful, often disturbing testimony and less than four hours of deliberation, jurors found Jon Phillips guilty of all counts related to the tragic starvation death of Chandler Grafner, the 7-year-old boy who had been placed in Phillips' care after Chandler's biological mother proved incapable of caring for him. Judge John W. Madden immediately sentenced Phillips to life in prison without parole on Phillips' first degree murder conviction. Earlier, Sarah Berry, Phillips' girlfriend, pled guilty and was sentenced to 48 years in prison for joining in the despicably cruel act of locking the boy in a darkened closet and systematically starving him to death.

Last in the collective exhalation of relief now that the defendants have been held accountable, however, are other important verdicts lingering in the shadows. Why, for instance, did a passive family sit idly by with their pork chops and other delicacies at a Thanksgiving dinner as Chandler was forced by the apparent controlling reprobate Phillips to eat oatmeal

in another room? Why did social workers spend only a few hours with the bruised Chandler and his younger brother before handing the boys back over to the callous couple who posed as caring guardians? Where was the boy's biological father while Chandler lived? Why didn't anyone step in to save this formerly full-of-life boy with the sky-opening smile from a long, lonely, and painful death in a waste-encrusted linen closet?

The questions need to be answered, and the public urgently needs to take notice that, even in the year 2008, children are being cruelly abused by caregivers who have no business pretending to be parents and no comprehension of basic human compassion and kindness. Horrific as Chandler's fate was, he is not alone. Just recently, a group of so-called adults in a religious cult in Baltimore were charged with first degree murder for starving a 19-month-old to death because the toddler wouldn't say "amen" at the dinner table. In Philadelphia, Daniel Kelly, a 14-year-old suffering from cerebral palsy, was left to die in a fetid, airless room after a group of people charged with caring for her — including her own parents and four social workers — failed to provide her

with food or water.

Clearly, the issue of child abuse is one which our civic and business leaders must place at the forefront of the public's agenda. Measures must be taken to ensure that the desperate, misfortunate end that befell young Chandler does not happen again. Notably, two such local organizations, the Tennyson Center for Children, and the Every Child Matters Education Fund, have already formed a partnership, the Children's Action Agenda, to promote a legislative agenda encompassing child advocacy issues and child healthcare initiatives. The group's latest event, the Tykes on Trikes Parade, occurred just this past weekend, as Mayor John Hickenlooper and Lieutenant Governor Barbara O'Brien led dozens of other rain-drenched marchers — young and old — around Denver's Civic Center Park to herald a renewed commitment to the health and future of our state's children.

As a practicing trial attorney in Denver, I had the unique opportunity to sit in on several days of the Phillips trial and to hear the gut-wrenching testimony that issued from the mouths of witnesses who

had crossed paths with the dying boy. In those moments during the trial, I was struck with one overriding sensation: Chandler Grafner was present there in the courtroom; he was palpably there, constantly reminding the assembled adults of the awful injustice that had been perpetrated on a small child by two people with seemingly no feelings of remorse, and no comprehension of the abject villainess of their misconduct. Then, I would think of what Chandler's half-brother, Dominic, had said about him to interviewers — that he was "an angel who went to Heaven" — and I thought of my own little boy whom I could see in Chandler's face in some of the photos admitted into evidence and who thankfully would never know the hopelessness and fear that Chandler must have felt during his long ordeal.

Justice was done in Courtroom 1 last week, but of course, it does not help a community grieving over the unnecessary loss of one of its own precious children. Chandler deserved better — from everyone — and his untimely passing, he will live or in this community and be a reminding angel to all of us.

*Moynihan, of Louisville, is a deputy district attorney in Denver*