



She was found curled up in a filthy room, unable to speak or make eye contact. They called her a feral child. Could nurturing make up for a lifetime of neglect?

# the girl in the window

STORY BY LANE DEGREGORY | PHOTOS BY MELISSA LYTTLE | *Of the Times*

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## About this story

The story of Danielle Lierow, known as the feral child, was published on the *Times* Web site, tampabay.com, on Aug. 1, 2008, and in print on Aug. 3. In its first week online, the Web presentation received nearly a half-million page views, a record for the site, with almost 1,000 readers leaving comments. More than 500 sent e-mails.

*St. Petersburg Times* reporter Lane DeGregory and *Times* photographer Melissa Lyttle met Danielle and her new family at their home in February. All of the scenes at their house and in speech therapy were witnessed by the journalists.

The opening scene and others were reconstructed from interviews with neighbors, the detective, Danielle's care manager, psychologist, teacher, legal guardian and the judge on her case. Additional information came from hundreds of pages of police reports, medical records and court documents.

Michelle Crockett was interviewed at home in Plant City.

In June 2008, Danielle's new parents sold their Florida home and moved out of state. Bernie built Dani a treehouse. In August, she began summer school.

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**Timeline**

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## Online

See and hear a multimedia presentation about Dani's development, her caregivers and her birth mother, and read the comments from readers at [www.tampabay.com/specials/2008/reports/danielle/](http://www.tampabay.com/specials/2008/reports/danielle/).

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# —the girl in the window—

## Part One | The Feral Child

PLANT CITY  
**T**he family had lived in the rundown rental house for almost three years when someone first saw a child's face in the window.

A little girl, pale, with dark eyes, lifted a dirty blanket above the broken glass and peered out, one neighbor remembered.

Everyone knew a woman lived in the house with her boyfriend and two adult sons. But they had never seen a child there, had never noticed anyone playing in the overgrown yard.

The girl looked young, 5 or 6, and thin. Too thin. Her cheeks seemed sunken; her eyes were lost.



**After Danielle was removed from a filthy, infested bedroom, she was taken to Tampa General Hospital. Malnourished and anemic, she spent six weeks there.**

The child stared into the square of sunlight, then slipped away.

Months went by. The face never reappeared.

Just before noon on July 13, 2005, a Plant City police car pulled up outside that shattered window. Two officers went into the house

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**The view through Danielle's window offered a shaft of sunlight and little else: one neighboring house and a junked-up yard. An old blanket covered the dirty, broken window but could not guard against insects; bugs filled the room, and the little girl's body was covered with bites.**

— and one stumbled back out.

Clutching his stomach, the rookie retched in the weeds.

Plant City Detective Mark Holste had been on the force for 18 years when he and his young partner were sent to the house on Old Sydney Road to stand by during a child abuse investigation. Someone had finally called the police.

They found a car parked outside. The driver's door was open

and a woman was slumped over in her seat, sobbing. She was an investigator for the Florida Department of Children and Families.

“Unbelievable,” she told Holste. “The worst I’ve ever seen.”

The police officers walked through the front door, into a cramped living room.

“I’ve been in rooms with bodies rotting there for a week and it never stunk that bad,” Holste said lat-

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er. “There’s just no way to describe it. Urine and feces — dog, cat and human excrement — smeared on the walls, mashed into the carpet. Everything dank and rotting.”

Tattered curtains, yellow with cigarette smoke, dangling from bent metal rods. Cardboard and old comforters stuffed into broken, grimy windows. Trash blanketing the stained couch, the sticky counters.

The floor, walls, even the ceiling seemed to sway beneath legions of scuttling roaches.

“It sounded like you were walking on eggshells. You couldn’t take a step without crunching German cockroaches,” the detective said. “They were in the lights, in the furniture. Even inside the freezer. The freezer!”

While Holste looked around, a stout woman in a faded housecoat

demanded to know what was going on. Yes, she lived there. Yes, those were her two sons in the living room. Her daughter? Well, yes, she had a daughter . . .

The detective strode past her, down a narrow hall. He turned the handle on a door, which opened into a space the size of a walk-in closet. He squinted in the dark.

At his feet, something stirred.

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First he saw the girl’s eyes: dark and wide, unfocused, unblinking. She wasn’t looking at him so much as through him.

She lay on a torn, moldy mattress on the floor. She was curled on her side, long legs tucked into her emaciated chest. Her ribs and collarbone jutted out; one skinny arm was slung over her face; her black hair was matted, crawling



“I still have nightmares about what that child had to live with for the first six years of her life. The thought of having to lie down with 1,000 cockroaches on a urine-soaked mattress every night...”

**Mark Holste**, Plant City detective

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with lice. Insect bites, rashes and sores pocked her skin. Though she looked old enough to be in school, she was naked — except for a swollen diaper.

“The pile of dirty diapers in that room must have been 4 feet high,” the detective said. “The glass in the window had been broken, and that child was just lying there, surrounded by her own excrement and bugs.”

When he bent to lift her, she yelped like a lamb. “It felt like I was picking up a baby,” Holste said. “I put her over my shoulder, and that diaper started leaking down my leg.”

The girl didn’t struggle. Holste asked, “What’s your name, honey?” The girl didn’t seem to hear.

He searched for clothes to dress her, but found only balled-up laundry, flecked with feces. He looked for a toy, a doll, a stuffed animal. “But the only ones I found were covered in maggots and roaches.”

Choking back rage, he approached the mother. How could you let this happen?

“The mother’s statement was:

‘I’m doing the best I can,’ “ the detective said. “I told her, ‘The best you can sucks!’ “

He wanted to arrest the woman right then, but when he called his boss he was told to let DCF do its own investigation.

So the detective carried the girl down the dim hall, past her brothers, past her mother in the doorway, who was shrieking, “Don’t take my baby!” He buckled the child into the state investigator’s car. The investigator agreed: They had to get the girl out of there.

“Radio ahead to Tampa General,” the detective remembers telling his partner. “If this child doesn’t get to a hospital, she’s not going to make it.”

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Her name, her mother had said, was Danielle. She was almost 7 years old.

She weighed 46 pounds. She was malnourished and anemic. In the pediatric intensive care unit they tried to feed the girl, but she couldn’t chew or swallow solid food. So they put her on an IV and

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let her drink from a bottle.

Aides bathed her, scrubbed the sores on her face, trimmed her torn fingernails. They had to cut her tangled hair before they could comb out the lice.

Her caseworker determined that she had never been to school, never seen a doctor. She didn't know how to hold a doll, didn't understand peek-a-boo. "Due to the severe neglect," a doctor would write, "the child will be disabled for the rest of her life."

Hunched in an oversized crib, Danielle curled in on herself like a potato bug, then writhed angrily, kicking and thrashing. To calm herself, she batted at her toes and sucked her fists. "Like an infant," one doctor wrote.

She wouldn't make eye contact. She didn't react to heat or cold — or pain. The insertion of an IV nee-

dle elicited no reaction. She never cried. With a nurse holding her hands, she could stand and walk sideways on her toes, like a crab. She couldn't talk, didn't know how to nod yes or no. Once in a while she grunted.

She couldn't tell anyone what had happened, what was wrong, what hurt.

Dr. Kathleen Armstrong, director of pediatric psychology at the University of South Florida medical school, was the first psychologist to examine Danielle. She said medical tests, brain scans, and vision, hearing and genetics checks found nothing wrong with the child. She wasn't deaf, wasn't autistic, had no physical ailments such as cerebral palsy or muscular dystrophy.

The doctors and social workers had no way of knowing all



“Your heart just goes out to this child. What happened to this poor little girl? How am I going to figure out how to help her?”

**Dr. Kathleen Armstrong**, pediatric psychologist,  
University of South Florida medical school



**Therapists are helping Danielle learn how to perform the simple tasks of daily life, such as scooping food up with a spoon and using a fork to stab at some of her favorite foods, green beans and tater tots.**

that had happened to Danielle. But the scene at the house, along with Danielle's almost comatose condition, led them to believe she had never been cared for beyond basic sustenance. Hard as it was to imagine, they doubted she had ever been taken out in the sun, sung to sleep, even hugged or held. She was fragile and beautiful, but whatever makes a person human

seemed somehow missing.

Armstrong called the girl's condition "environmental autism." Danielle had been deprived of interaction for so long, the doctor believed, that she had withdrawn into herself.

The most extraordinary thing about Danielle, Armstrong said, was her lack of engagement with people, with anything. "There was



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no light in her eye, no response or recognition.... We saw a little girl who didn't even respond to hugs or affection. Even a child with the most severe autism responds to those."

Danielle's was "the most outrageous case of neglect I've ever seen."



The authorities had discovered the rarest and most pitiable of creatures: a feral child.

The term is not a diagnosis. It comes from historic accounts — some fictional, some true — of children raised by animals and therefore not exposed to human nurturing. Wolf boys and bird girls, Tarzan, Mowgli from *The Jungle Book*.

It's said that during the Holy Roman Empire, Frederick II gave a group of infants to some nuns. He told them to take care of the children but never to speak to them. He believed the babies would eventually reveal the true language of God. Instead, they died from the lack of interaction.

Then there was the Wild Boy of Aveyron, who wandered out of the woods near Paris in 1800, naked and grunting. He was about 12. A teacher took him in and named him Victor. He tried to socialize the child, teach him to talk. But after several years, he gave up on the teen and asked the housekeeper to care for him.

"In the first five years of life, 85 percent of the brain is developed," said Armstrong, the psychologist who examined Danielle. "Those early relationships, more than anything else, help wire the brain and provide children with the experience to trust, to develop language, to communicate. They need that system to relate to the world."

The importance of nurturing has been shown again and again. In the 1960s, psychologist Harry Harlow put groups of infant rhesus monkeys in a room with two artificial mothers. One, made of wire, dispensed food. The other, of terrycloth, extended cradled arms. Though they were starving, the baby monkeys all climbed into the warm cloth arms.

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“Primates need comfort even more than they need food,” Armstrong said.

The most recent case of a feral child was in 1970, in California. A girl whom therapists came to call Genie had been strapped to a potty chair until she was 13. Like the Wild Boy, Genie was studied in hospitals and laboratories. She was in her 20s when doctors realized she'd never talk, never be able to take care of herself. She ended up in foster care, closed off from the world, utterly dependent.

Danielle's case — which unfolded out of the public spotlight, without a word in the media — raised disturbing questions for everyone trying to help her. How could this have happened? What kind of mother would sit by year after year while her daughter languished in her own filth, starving

and crawling with bugs?

And why hadn't someone intervened? The neighbors, the authorities — where had they been?

“It's mind-boggling that in the 21st century we can still have a child who's just left in a room like a gerbil,” said Tracy Sheehan, Danielle's guardian in the legal system and now a circuit court judge. “No food. No one talking to her or reading her a story. She can't even use her hands. How could this child be so invisible?”

But the most pressing questions were about her future.

When Danielle was discovered, she was younger by six years than the Wild Boy or Genie, giving hope that she might yet be teachable. Many of her caregivers had high hopes they could make her whole.

Danielle had probably missed the chance to learn speech, but

“Everyone said there's nothing there, in that child. But I could feel it. I could even see it. There was just this look on her face.”

**Bernie Lierow**, 48, and his wife, Diane, saw Danielle's photo, left, in the Heart Gallery, an exhibit of children available for adoption.



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**In the blink of an eye, Danielle can switch from happily building sand castles at the beach to throwing a violent fit. Her parents use a reassuring voice to soothe her, letting her know that she is safe.**

maybe she could come to understand language, to communicate in other ways.

Still, doctors had only the most modest ambitions for her.

“My hope was that she would be able to sleep through the night, to be out of diapers and to feed herself,” Armstrong said. If things went really well, she said, Danielle would end up “in a nice nursing home.”

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Danielle spent six weeks at Tampa General before she was well enough to leave. But where could she go? Not home; Judge Martha Cook, who oversaw her dependency hearing, ordered that Danielle be placed in foster care and that her mother not be allowed to call or visit her. The mother was being investigated on criminal child abuse charges.

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“That child, she broke my heart,” Cook said later. “We were so distraught over her condition, we agonized over what to do.”

Eventually, Danielle was placed in a group home in Land O’Lakes. She had a bed with sheets and a pillow, clothes and food, and someone at least to change her diapers.

In October 2005, a couple of weeks after she turned 7, Danielle started school for the first time. She was placed in a special ed class at Sanders Elementary.

“Her behavior was different than any child I’d ever seen,” said Kevin O’Keefe, Danielle’s first teacher. “If you put food anywhere near her, she’d grab it” and mouth it like a baby, he said. “She had a lot of episodes of great agitation, yelling, flailing her arms, rolling into a fetal position. She’d curl up in a closet, just to be away from everyone. She didn’t know how to climb a slide or swing on a swing. She didn’t want to be touched.”

It took her a year just to become consolable, he said.

By Thanksgiving 2006 — a year and a half after Danielle had gone

## Timeline

**Sept. 21, 1998:** Danielle Crockett is born in Las Vegas. Her mom, Michelle, met her dad in a casino, but can’t remember his name.

**March 2000:** Michelle’s mobile home is Vegas burns down. She and her three kids take a Greyhound to Florida.

**February 2002:** A caller tells the child abuse hotline that a girl in a Brandon apartment is living in filth, covered in feces, never seen wearing anything but a diaper. An investigator visits the home, but leaves Danielle and her brother there.

**November 2002:** A different caller tells the child abuse hotline that a little girl is being left alone for days with her retarded teenage brother. The mother is “not fit” to be a mother. Again, investigators visit and leave the child there.

**January 2003:** Michelle moves her children into a tiny Plant City house to live with her new boyfriend, whom she met at the Moose Lodge. **MORE ▶**

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into foster care — her caseworker was thinking about finding her a permanent home.

A nursing home, group home or medical foster care facility could take care of Danielle. But she needed more.

“In my entire career with the child welfare system, I don’t ever remember a child like Danielle,” said Luanne Panacek, executive director of the Children’s Board of Hillsborough County. “It makes you think about what does quality of life mean? What’s the best we can hope for her? After all she’s been through, is it just being safe?”

That fall, Panacek decided to include Danielle in the Heart Gallery — a set of portraits depicting children available for adoption. The Children’s Board displays the pictures in malls and on the Internet in hopes that people will fall in love with the children and take them home.

In Hillsborough alone, 600 kids are available for adoption. Who, Panacek wondered, would choose an 8-year-old who was still in dia-

## Timeline

**July 2005:** Another caller tells the child abuse hotline that a girl is being kept in a tiny room in a filthy Plant City house.

**July 13, 2005:** The child abuse investigator who finds Danielle is so horrified she flees the house, crying. A rookie cop retches. And a detective takes the 6-year-old from her mother, straight to the hospital.

**September 2005:** Danielle is moved to a foster home in Land O’Lakes. She tries to sleep in the closet.

**October 2005:** A judge terminates Michelle Crockett’s parental rights. Later, a doctor determines that Danielle is “environmentally autistic,” severely delayed because of a lack of social interaction and stimulation. She begins special education classes, going to school for the first time.

**March 2006:** Michelle Crockett is charged with child neglect and taken to jail; she’s released the next day.

**MORE ▶**

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pers, who didn't know her own name and might not ever speak or let you hug her?



The day Danielle was supposed to have her picture taken for the Heart Gallery, she showed up with red Kool-Aid dribbled down her new blouse. She hadn't yet mastered a sippy cup.

Garet White, Danielle's care manager, scrubbed the girl's shirt and washed her face. She brushed Danielle's bangs from her forehead and begged the photographer to please be patient.

White stepped behind the photographer and waved at Danielle. She put her thumbs in her ears and wiggled her hands, stuck out her tongue and rolled her eyes. Danielle didn't even blink.

White was about to give up when she heard a sound she'd never heard from Danielle. The child's eyes were still dull, apparently unseeing. But her mouth was open. She looked like she was trying to laugh.

Click. ■

## Timeline

**February 2007:** A family from Fort Myers sees Danielle's photo in the Tampa Bay Heart Gallery and calls, wanting to meet her.

**April 2007:** Facing 20 years in jail, Michelle Crockett pleads guilty to child neglect and agrees not to fight for her parental rights. She is sentenced to two years of house arrest.

**May 2007:** Danielle moves in with her new family in Fort Meyers. They paint her bedroom pink and fill her closet with new clothes. They enroll her in school and three types of therapy.

**Oct. 29, 2007:** Danielle is officially adopted. Her new parents call her Dani.

**May 2008:** A year after Dani moved in with her new family, she is using the bathroom, using a fork, responding to her name. She has learned how to laugh. And sometimes, when you tickle her really hard, she even blurts out a word.

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**Bernie Lierow loves to give his daughter, Dani, kisses and hugs, even if she can't give them back. He has high hopes for her life, though he knows he may not be able to fix everything for her.**

## **Part Two** | Becoming Dani

**T**eenagers tore through the arcade, firing fake rifles. Sweaty boys hunched over air hockey tables. Girls squealed as they stomped on blinking squares.

Bernie and Diane Lierow remember standing silently inside GameWorks in Tampa, overwhelmed. They had driven three hours from their home in Fort Myers Beach, hoping to meet a child at this foster care event.

**STORY BY LANE DEGREGORY | PHOTOS BY MELISSA LYTTLE | *Of the Times***

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But all these kids seemed too wild, too big and, well, too worldly.

Bernie, 48, remodels houses. Diane, 45, cleans homes. They have four grown sons from previous marriages and one together. Diane couldn't have any more children, and Bernie had always wanted a daughter. So last year, when William was 9, they decided to adopt.

Their new daughter would have to be younger than William, they told foster workers. But she would have to be potty-trained and able to feed herself. They didn't want a child who might hurt their son, or who was profoundly disabled and unable to take care of herself.

On the Internet they had found a girl in Texas, another in Georgia. Each time they were told, "That one is dangerous. She can't be with other children."

That's why they were at this Heart Gallery gathering, scanning the crowd.

Bernie's head ached from all the jangling games; Diane's stomach hurt, seeing all the abandoned kids; and William was tired of shooting aliens.

Diane stepped out of the chaos, into an alcove beneath the stairs. That was when she saw it. A little girl's face on a flier, pale with sunken cheeks and dark hair chopped too short. Her brown eyes seemed to be searching for something.

Diane called Bernie over. He saw the same thing she did. "She just looked like she needed us."



Bernie and Diane are humble, unpretentious people who would rather picnic on their deck than eat out. They go to work, go to church, visit with their neighbors, walk their dogs. They don't travel or pursue exotic interests; a vacation for them is hanging out at home with the family. Shy and soft-spoken, they're both slow to anger and, they say, seldom argue.

They had everything they ever wanted, they said. Except for a daughter.

But the more they asked about Danielle, the more they didn't want to know.

She was 8, but functioned as a 2-year-old. She had been left alone



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in a dank room, ignored for most of her life.

No, she wasn't there at the video arcade; she was in a group home. She wore diapers, couldn't feed herself, couldn't talk. After more than a year in school, she still wouldn't make eye contact or play with other kids.

No one knew, really, what was wrong with her, or what she might be capable of.

"She was everything we didn't want," Bernie said.

But they couldn't forget those aching eyes.

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When they met Danielle at her school, she was drooling. Her tongue hung from her mouth. Her head, which seemed too big for her thin neck, lolled side to side.

She looked at them for an in-



**Her big brother William, 10, is a role model for Dani in many ways. But she lacks the fine motor skills required to follow his lead in brushing her teeth before bedtime, so she gets help from her dad.**

stant, then loped away across the special ed classroom. She rolled onto her back, rocked for a while, then batted at her toes.

Diane walked over and spoke to her softly. Danielle didn't seem to notice. But when Bernie bent down, Danielle turned toward him and her eyes seemed to focus.

He held out his hand. She let him pull her to her feet. Danielle's teacher, Kevin O'Keefe, was amazed; he hadn't seen her warm up to anyone so quickly.

# —the girl in the window

Bernie led Danielle to the playground, she pulling sideways and prancing on her tiptoes. She squinted in the sunlight but let him push her gently on the swing. When it was time for them to part, Bernie swore he saw Danielle wave.

That night, he had a dream. Two giant hands slid through his bedroom ceiling, the fingers laced together. Danielle was swinging on those hands, her dark eyes wide, thin arms reaching for him.



Everyone told them not to do it, neighbors, co-workers, friends. Everyone said they didn't know what they were getting into.

So what if Danielle is not everything we hoped for? Bernie and Diane answered. You can't pre-order your own kids. You take what God gives you.

They brought her home on Easter weekend 2007. It was supposed to be a rebirth, of sorts — a baptism into their family.

"It was a disaster," Bernie said.

They gave her a doll; she bit off

its hands. They took her to the beach; she screamed and wouldn't put her feet in the sand. Back at her new home, she tore from room to room, her swim diaper spewing streams across the carpet.

She couldn't peel the wrapper from a chocolate egg, so she ate the shiny paper too. She couldn't sit still to watch TV or look at a book. She couldn't hold a crayon. When they tried to brush her teeth or comb her hair, she kicked and thrashed. She wouldn't lie in a bed, wouldn't go to sleep, just rolled on her back, side to side, for hours.

All night she kept popping up, creeping sideways on her toes into the kitchen. She would pull out the frozen food drawer and stand on the bags of vegetables so she could see into the refrigerator.

"She wouldn't take anything," Bernie said. "I guess she wanted to make sure the food was still there."

When Bernie tried to guide her back to bed, Danielle railed against him and bit her own hands.

In time, Danielle's new family learned what worked and what

# the girl in the window

didn't. Her foster family had been giving her anti-psychotic drugs to mitigate her temper tantrums and help her sleep. When Bernie and Diane weaned her off the medication, she stopped drooling and started holding up her head. She let Bernie brush her teeth.

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Bernie and Diane already thought of Danielle as their daugh-

ter, but legally she wasn't. Danielle's birth mother did not want to give her up even though she had been charged with child abuse and faced 20 years in prison. So prosecutors offered a deal: If she waived her parental rights, they wouldn't send her to jail.

She took the plea. She was given two years of house arrest, plus probation. And 100 hours of community service.



“It scared me at first. She did weird things, batted at stuff. And she'd run around all the time because she didn't know what to do. Mostly, now, it's good because I always have company.”

**William Lierow**, 10, tickles his new little sister to make her laugh.

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In October 2007, Bernie and Diane officially adopted Danielle. They call her Dani.



“Okay, let’s put your shoes on. Do you need to go potty again?” Diane asks.

It’s an overcast Monday morning in spring 2008 and Dani is late for school. Again. She keeps flitting around the living room, ducking behind chairs and sofas, pulling at her shorts.

After a year with her new family, Dani scarcely resembles the girl in the Heart Gallery photo. She has grown a foot and her weight has doubled.

All those years she was kept inside, her hair was as dark as the dirty room she lived in. But since she started going to the beach and swimming in their backyard pool, Dani’s shoulder-length hair has turned a golden blond. She still shrieks when anyone tries to brush it.

The changes in her behavior are subtle, but Bernie and Diane see progress. They give an example: When Dani feels overwhelmed she

retreats to her room, rolls onto her back, pulls one sock toward the end of her toes and bats it. For hours. Bernie and Diane tell her to stop.

Now, when Dani hears them coming, she peels off her sock and throws it into the closet to hide it.

She’s learning right from wrong, they say. And she seems upset when she knows she has disappointed them. As if she cares how they feel.

Bernie and Diane were told to put Dani in school with profoundly disabled children, but they insisted on different classes because they believe she can do more. They take her to occupational and physical therapy, to church and the mall and the grocery store. They have her in speech classes and horseback riding lessons.

Once, when Dani was trying to climb onto her horse, the mother of a boy in the therapeutic class turned to Diane.

“You’re so lucky,” Diane remembers the woman saying.

“Lucky?” Diane asked.

The woman nodded. “I know my son will never stand on his own,

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will never be able to climb onto a horse. You have no idea what your daughter might be able to do.”

Diane finds hope in that idea. She counts small steps to convince herself things are slowly improving. So what if Dani steals food off other people’s trays at McDonald’s? At least she can feed herself chicken nuggets now. So what if she already has been to the bathroom four times this morning? She’s finally out of diapers.

It took months, but they taught her to hold a stuffed teddy on the toilet so she wouldn’t be scared to be alone in the bathroom. They bribed her with M&M’s.

“Dani, sit down and try to use the potty,” Diane coaxes. “Pull down your shorts. That’s a good girl.”



Every weekday, for half an hour, speech therapist Leslie Goldenberg tries to teach Dani to talk. She sits her in front of a mirror at a Bonita Springs elementary school and shows her how to purse her lips to make puffing sounds.

“Puh-puh-puh,” says the teach-

er. “Here, feel my mouth.” She brings Dani’s fingers to her lips, so she can feel the air.

Dani nods. She knows how to nod now. Goldenberg puffs again.

Leaning close to the mirror, Dani purses her lips, opens and closes them. No sound comes out. She can imitate the movement, but doesn’t know she has to blow out air to make the noise.

She bends closer, scowls at her reflection. Her lips open and close again, then she leaps up and runs across the room. She grabs a Koosh ball and bounces it rapidly.

She’s lost inside herself. Again.

But in many ways, Dani already has surpassed the teacher’s expectations, and not just in terms of speech. She seems to be learning to listen, and she understands simple commands. She pulls at her pants to show she needs to go to the bathroom, taps a juice box when she wants more. She can sit at a table for five-minute stretches, and she’s starting to scoop applesauce with a spoon. She’s down to just a few temper tantrums a month. She is learning to push buttons on a speaking

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board, to use symbols to show when she wants a book or when she's angry. She's learning it's okay to be angry: You can deal with those feelings without biting your own hands.

"I'd like her to at least be able to master a sound board, so she can communicate her choices even if she never finds her voice," Goldenberg says. "I think she understands most of what we say. It's just that she doesn't always know how to — or want to — react."

Dani's teacher and family have heard her say only a few words, and all of them seemed accidental. Once she blurted "baaa," startling Goldenberg to tears. It was the first letter sound she had ever made.

She seems to talk most often when William is tickling her, as if something from her subconscious seeps out when she's too distracted to shut it off. Her brother has



**A spontaneous act of affection pleasantly surprises Dani's speech therapist, Leslie Goldenberg, who holds Dani in her lap for a while and plants a big kiss on the little girl's cheek.**

heard her say, "Stop!" and "No!" He thought he even heard her say his name.

Having a brother just one year older is invaluable for Dani's development, her teacher says. She has someone to practice language with, someone who will listen. "Even deaf infants will coo," Goldenberg said. "But if no one responds, they stop."

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William says Dani frightened him at first. "She did weird things."

# the girl in the window

But he always wanted someone to play with. He doesn't care that she can't ride bikes with him or play Monopoly. "I drive her around in my Jeep and she honks the horn," he says. "She's learning to match up cards and stuff."

He couldn't believe she had never walked a dog or licked an ice cream cone. He taught her how to play peek-a-boo, helped her squish Play-Doh through her fingers. He showed her it was safe to walk on sand and fun to blow bubbles and okay to cry; when you hurt, someone comes. He taught her how to open a present. How to pick up tater tots and dunk them into a mountain of ketchup.

William was used to living like an only child, but since Dani has moved in, she gets most of their parents' attention. "She needs them more than me," he says simply.

He gave her his old toys, his "kid movies," his board books. He even moved out of his bedroom so she could sleep upstairs. His parents painted his old walls pink and filled the closet with cotton-candy dresses.

They moved a daybed into the

laundry room for William, squeezed it between the washing machine and Dani's rocking horse. Each night, the 10-year-old boy cuddles up with a walkie-talkie because "it's scary down here, all alone."

After a few minutes, while his parents are trying to get Dani to bed, William always sneaks into the living room and folds himself into the love seat.

He trades his walkie-talkie for a small stuffed Dalmatian and calls down the hall, "Good night, Mom and Dad. Good night, Dani."

Some day, he's sure, she will answer.



Even now, Dani won't sleep in a bed.

Bernie bought her a new trundle so she can slide out the bottom bunk and be at floor level. Diane found pink Hello Kitty sheets and a stuffed glow worm so Dani will never again be alone in the dark.

"You got your wormie? You ready to go to sleep?" Bernie asks, bending to pick up his daughter. She's turning slow circles beneath

# the girl in the window

the window, holding her worm by his tail. Bernie lifts her to the glass and shows her the sun, slipping behind the neighbor's house.

He hopes, one day, she might be able to call him "Daddy," to get married or at least live on her own. But if that doesn't happen, he says, "That's okay too. For me, it's all about getting the kisses and the hugs."

For now, Bernie and Diane are content to give Dani what she

never had before: comfort and stability, attention and affection. A trundle, a glow worm.

Now Bernie tips Dani into bed, smooths her golden hair across the pillow. "Night-night," he says, kissing her forehead.

"Good night, honey," Diane calls from the doorway.

Bernie lowers the shade. As he walks past Dani, she reaches out and grabs his ankles. ■



**Dani, 9, has a new family now, and a new chance at life thanks to her brother William, 10, and parents Diane and Bernie Lierow.**



# —the girl in the window—



“I guess I’m guilty of having a dirty house. And not sending her to school. And I never took her to a doctor because she was never sick.”

**Michelle Crockett**, 51, has two grown sons. Danielle was her youngest child.

## **Part Three** | The Mother

She’s out there somewhere, looming over Danielle’s story like a ghost. To Bernie and Diane, Danielle’s birth mother is a cipher, almost never spoken of. The less said, the better. As far as they are concerned Danielle was born the day they found her. And yet this unimagi-

STORY BY LANE DEGREGORY | PHOTOS BY MELISSA LYTTLE | *Of the Times*

# —the girl in the window

nable woman is out there somewhere, most likely still on probation, permanently unburdened of her daughter, and thinking — what? What can she possibly say? Nothing. Not a thing. But none of this makes any sense without her.

Michelle Crockett lives in a mobile home in Plant City with her two 20-something sons, three cats and a closet full of kittens. The trailer is just down the road from the little house where she lived with Danielle.

On a steamy afternoon a few weeks ago, Michelle opens the door wearing a long T-shirt. When she sees two strangers, she ducks inside and pulls on a housecoat. She's tall and stout, with broad shoulders and the sallow skin of a smoker. She looks tired, older than her 51 years.

"My daughter?" she asks. "You want to talk about my daughter?" Her voice catches. Tears pool in her glasses.

The inside of the trailer is modest but clean: dishes drying on the counter, silk flowers on the table.

Sitting in her kitchen, chain-smoking 305s, she starts at the end: the day the detective took Danielle.

"Part of me died that day," she says.

•••

Michelle says she was a student at the University of Tampa when she met a man named Bernie at a bar. It was 1976. He was a Vietnam vet, 10 years her senior. They got married and moved to Las Vegas, where he drove a taxi.

Right away they had two sons, Bernard and Grant. The younger boy wasn't potty-trained until he was 4, didn't talk until he was 5. "He was sort of slow," Michelle says. In school, they put him in special ed.

Her sons were teenagers when her husband got sick. Agent Orange, the doctors said. When he died in August 1997, Michelle filed for bankruptcy.

Six months later, she met a man in a casino. He was in Vegas on business. She went back to his hotel room with him.

"His name was Ron," she says.

# —the girl in the window

She shakes her head. “No, it was Bob. I think it was Bob.”



For hours Michelle Crockett spins out her story, tapping ashes into a plastic ashtray. Everything she says sounds like a plea, but for what? Understanding? Sympathy? She doesn’t apologize. Far from it. She feels wronged.

Danielle, she says, was born in a hospital in Las Vegas, a healthy baby who weighed 7 pounds, 6 ounces. Her Apgar score measuring her health was a 9, nearly perfect.

“She screamed a lot,” Michelle says. “I just thought she was spoiled.”

When Danielle was 18 months old, Michelle’s mobile home burned down, so she loaded her two sons and baby daughter onto a Greyhound bus and headed to Florida, to bunk with a cousin.

They lost their suitcases along the way, she says. The cousin couldn’t take the kids. After a week, Michelle moved into a Brandon apartment with no furniture, no

clothes, no dishes. She got hired as a cashier at Publix. But it was okay: “The boys were with her,” she says. She says she has the paperwork to prove it.



She goes to the boys’ bathroom, returns with a box full of documents and hands it over.

The earliest documents are from Feb. 11, 2002. That was when someone called the child abuse hotline on her. The caller reported that a child, about 3, was “left unattended for days with a retarded older brother, never seen wearing anything but a diaper.”

This is Michelle’s proof that her sons were watching Danielle.

The caller continued:

“The home is filthy. There are clothes everywhere. There are feces on the child’s seat and the counter is covered with trash.”

It’s not clear what investigators found at the house, but they left Danielle with her mother that day.

Nine months later, another call to authorities. A person who knew Michelle from the Moose Lodge

# —the girl in the window

said she was always there playing bingo with her new boyfriend, leaving her children alone overnight.

“Not fit to be a mother,” the caller said.

The hotline operator took these notes: The 4-year-old girl “is still wearing a diaper and drinking from a baby bottle. On-going situation, worse since last August. Mom leaves Grant and Danielle at home for several days in a row while she goes to work and spends the night with a new paramour. Danielle . . . is never seen outside the home.”

Again the child abuse investigators went out. They offered Michelle free day care for Danielle. She refused. And they left Danielle there.

Why? Didn't they worry about two separate calls to the hotline, months apart, citing the same concerns?

“It's not automatic that because the home is dirty we'd remove the child,” said Nick Cox, regional director of the Florida Department of Children and Families. “And what they found in 2002 was not like the

scene they walked into in 2005.”

The aim, he said, is to keep the child with the parent, and try to help the parent get whatever services he or she might need. But Michelle refused help. And investigators might have felt they didn't have enough evidence to take Danielle, Cox said.

“I'm concerned, though, that no effort was made to interview the child,” he said.

“If you have a 4-year-old who is unable to speak, that would raise a red flag to me. “I'm not going to tell you this was okay. I don't know how it could have happened.”

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Michelle insists Danielle was fine.

“I tried to potty-train her, she wouldn't train. I tried to get her into schools, no one would take her,” she says in the kitchen of her trailer. The only thing she ever noticed was wrong, she says, “was that she didn't speak much. She talked in a soft tone. She'd say, ‘Let's go eat.’ But no one could hear her except me.”

# the girl in the window

She says she took Danielle to the library and the park. “I took her out for pizza. Once.” But she can’t remember which library, which park or where they went for pizza.

“She liked this song I’d sing her,” Michelle says. “Miss Polly had a dolly, she was sick, sick, sick . . .”

Michelle’s older son, Bernard, told a judge that he once asked his mom why she never took Danielle to the doctor. Something’s wrong with her, he remembered telling her. He said she answered, “If they see her, they might take her away.”

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A few months after the second abuse call, Michelle and her kids moved in with her boyfriend in the rundown rental house in Plant City. The day the cops came, Michelle says, she didn’t know what was wrong.

The detective found Danielle in the back, sleeping. The only window in the small space was broken. Michelle had tacked a blanket across the shattered glass, but flies and beetles and roaches had crept in anyway.

“My house was a mess,” she says. “I’d been sick and it got away from me. But I never knew a dirty house was against the law.”

The cop walked past her, carrying Danielle.

“He said she was starving. I told him me and my sisters were all skinny till we were 13.

“I begged him, ‘Please, don’t take my baby! Please!’”

She says she put socks on her daughter before he took her to the car, but couldn’t find any shoes.

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A judge ordered Michelle to have a psychological evaluation. That’s among the documents, too.

Danielle’s IQ, the report says, is below 50, indicating “severe mental retardation.” Michelle’s is 77, “borderline range of intellectual ability.”

“She tended to blame her difficulties on circumstances while rationalizing her own actions,” wrote psychologist Richard Enrico Spana. She “is more concerned with herself than most other adults, and this could lead her to

# —the girl in the window

neglect paying adequate attention to people around her.”

She wanted to fight for her daughter, she says, but didn’t want to go to jail and didn’t have enough money for a lawyer.

“I tried to get people to help me,” Michelle says. “They say I made her autistic. But how do you make a kid autistic? They say I didn’t put clothes on her — but she just tore them off.”

After Danielle was taken away, Michelle says, she tripped over a box at Wal-Mart and got in a car accident and couldn’t work anymore. In February, she went back to court and a judge waived her community service hours.

She’s on probation until 2012.

She spends her days with her sons, doing crossword puzzles and watching movies. Sometimes they talk about Danielle.

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When Danielle was in the hospital, Michelle says, she and her sons sneaked in to see her. Michelle took a picture from the file: Danielle, drowning in a hospital gown,

slumped in a bed that folded into a wheelchair.

“That’s the last picture I have of her,” Michelle says. In her kitchen, she snubs out her cigarette. She crosses to the living room, where Danielle’s image looks down from the wall.

She reaches up and, with her finger, traces her daughter’s face. “When I moved here,” she says, “that was the first thing I hung.”

She says she misses Danielle.

“Have you seen her?” Michelle asks. “Is she okay?”

•••

Is she okay?

Danielle is better than anyone dared hope. She has learned to look at people and let herself be held. She can chew ham. She can swim. She’s tall and blond and has a little belly. She knows her name is Dani.

In her new room, she has a window she can look out of. When she wants to see outside, all she has to do is raise her arms and her dad is right behind her, waiting to pick her up. ■

# —the girl in the window

## Epilogue | Everyone Wants to Help

**T**he Girl in the Window” has drawn an outpouring of calls, e-mails and offers of help from readers in Florida and around the world.

“I was shocked by Dani’s story, uplifted by her adoption by the Lierows,” Rachel Silver wrote. “Even though I’m an agnostic, I kept muttering, ‘God BLESS them!’”

The story raised questions about language and laws and love. It made people suspect their neighbors and hug their kids and, most of all, want to help.

“You gave us something to think about,” reader Susanne Whelan wrote. “We all must keep our eyes open and report things that are not right.”

“The Girl in the Window” was linked on a blog for moms in South Africa, on a forum for gamers playing Battlefield 2, on a site for fans of the TV show Firefly. It was featured on fark, on facebook, on digg and on softballfans.com.



**No one has any way of telling what lies behind Dani’s big brown eyes and vacant stare.**

The Heart Gallery of Tampa Bay, which found the adoptive family for Danielle, received 2,000 hits a day on its Web site, up from the usual 500, said Carolyn Eastman of the Children’s Board of Hillsborough County. The Heart Gal-

# —the girl in the window

lery also received 100 e-mails and 80 phone calls from people commenting on the story or inquiring about adopting a child.

In Tampa, a company called GrafX Design has created a site for Danielle, [www.danisstory.org](http://www.danisstory.org). Built with the cooperation of the Heart Gallery and Danielle's adoptive parents, it allows readers to make donations through PayPal to support the girl's on going care and therapy.



"That something like this could happen in 21st century America is astonishing," Michael Jefferson wrote to the *Times* from Warrenton, Va.

Many calls have gone directly to child welfare workers.

"We are hearing from human service providers who are getting calls from citizens who want to report suspected child abuse, citizens who want to advocate for stricter consequences for convicted child abusers, local counselors who are having child abuse victims who are now adults come forward

for help," wrote Eastman of the Children's Board.

Most people who wrote to the *Times* wanted to help Dani. The family's former bank in Fort Myers set up a fund for donations (see box on page 34 for address).

"I would like to have some money out of our retirement go directly to Danielle's parents to help with whatever is necessary," Cynthia Jennings wrote from Tampa. "I too was adopted by wonderful parents."

Other media clamored to meet Dani. *Inside Edition* called the detective; a writer for a British women's magazine wants to see her; book publishers, movie makers, everyone wants to share her story.

Someone is writing a song for her. Someone is sending her presents.



"It's been real wild," said Bernie Lierow, Dani's new dad who adopted her last year. The Children's Board is forwarding messages to him and his wife. "We've been getting calls from all sorts of people."

Dani is 9 now, out of diapers and able to feed herself. She still walks



# the girl in the window



**Before, a small, smudged pane of glass was Dani's only window to the world. Now, with her dad holding her tight, she enjoys looking at the sunset before bedtime.**

on her tiptoes and she can't brush her teeth. But she can hold the dog's leash. She'll sit still, watching cartoons, for half-hour stretches. She likes pink dresses and books about puppies and Beatles music. She understands almost everything. And she's starting to say a few words: "More" and "now."

In June, Dani moved with her

new parents and 10-year-old brother, William, from their home in Fort Myers to another state where Bernie works in remodeling. (They asked that the place be kept private.)

They have a nice house on an acre, Bernie said, with a tree fort and swing set. William has his own room, filled with pirate posters

# —the girl in the window

and his pet parrot. Dani's trundle is still covered with Hello Kitty sheets, near the window in her new room.

She is taking speech therapy and will soon be starting horse-back riding therapy. She's signed up for the Special Olympics, and next week, her folks are taking her to her first county fair.

"She's just doing real good," Bernie said. "Every day, it seems, there's something new."

Last week, she really startled him — and gave him hope. They were in the kitchen, and he was trying to brush her hair, which she hates. She pulled back from him and blurted something that sounded like, "I'm outta here!"

Bernie doesn't think it was an accident.

"As soon as she said it, she split." ■

*A version of this epilogue was written by Mike Wilson and published by the St. Petersburg Times on August 10, 2008. Wilson can be reached at [mike@sptimes.com](mailto:mike@sptimes.com) or (727) 892-2924. Lane DeGregory contributed to this epilogue and can be reached at [degregory@sptimes.com](mailto:degregory@sptimes.com) or (727) 893-8825.*

## How to help

The Lierow family's former bank has established a fund where donations for Dani can be sent. The address is: Danielle Lierow, c/o Mr. Doy McPhail, Wachovia Bank, 7128 Estero Blvd., Fort Myers Beach, FL 33931.

Donations can also be made through the Web site **[www.danisstory.org](http://www.danisstory.org)**; these go directly into Dani's account, according to her father, Bernie Lierow.

- For information on adoption in Hillsborough County: (813) 229-2884; **[www.HeartGalleryTampaBay.org](http://www.HeartGalleryTampaBay.org)**.
- In Pinellas/Pasco: (727) 456-0637; **[www.HeartGalleryKids.org](http://www.HeartGalleryKids.org)**.
- If you can't adopt, but want to help foster children in Pinellas or Pasco: (727) 824-0863; **[www.projectpatchwork.org](http://www.projectpatchwork.org)**.
- In Hillsborough: (813) 651-3150; **[www.sylviathomascenter.org](http://www.sylviathomascenter.org)**.