

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*

the girl in the window

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.

Part 1 | The Feral Child
Timeline

Part 2 | Becoming Dani

Part 3 | The Mother

Part 4 | Everyone Wants to Help
How to Help



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/.

This digital newsbook was produced for the St. Petersburg Times at the Donald W. Reynolds Journalism Institute in Columbia, Missouri. www.rjionline.org

—the girl in the window—

Part One | The Feral Child

PLANT CITY
The 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-

—the girl in the window

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.

•••

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

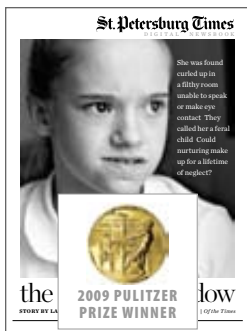


“I still have nightmares about what that child had to live with for the first six years of her life. The thought of having to lie down with 1,000 cockroaches on a urine-soaked mattress every night...”

Mark Holste, Plant City detective

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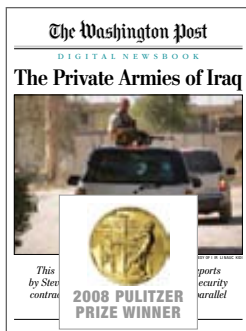
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