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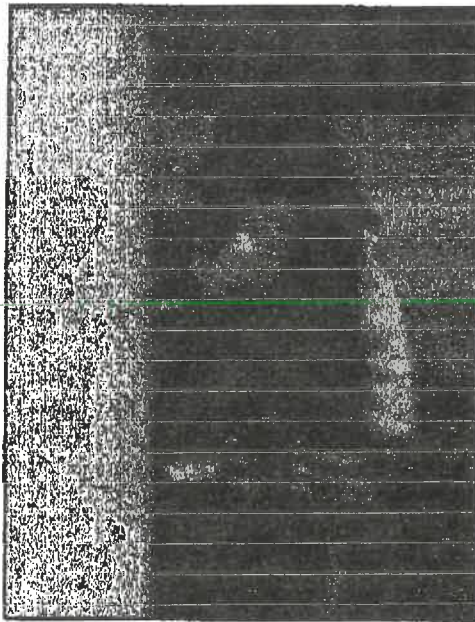
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More News

- [Little Girl Lost](#)
- [Wall of Death and other acts included in grand opening](#)
- [Should West Milford remain a member of the sewage authority?](#)
- [Crystal Springs Record aids the big turtle](#)
- [How many rays are there in the park?](#)
- [Republicans demand ethics reforms as](#)
- [Cervine implements change](#)
- [Dopply crash on Rt. 23](#)
- [The beauty within the beast](#)
- [Help for creating a habitat](#)
- [They want you to take a hike](#)
- [These weeks are cool](#)
- [Lenni-Lengua Girl](#)

WEST MILFORD MESSENGER > NEWS

Little Girl Lost



Struggling through By JoAnn Baker, Editor's note: Some of the names in this story have been changed to protect confidentiality.

West Milford — Crystal is a bright, articulate six-year-old. Sometimes she is violent, biting and kicking for no apparent reason. Sometimes she is somber and quiet, unable to sleep and full of anxiety.

When she was three she told her mother Mary that her father had touched her in a way that caused Mary alarm. The couple had been having marital difficulties and had been seeing a therapist. Mary called the therapist the next day and brought Crystal in for a session.

That was three years, five evaluations, and many court dates ago. Talk of lawyers and courts became common around the house. According to Mary's nearly-daily diary, shortly before Crystal's fourth Christmas she gave her mom 13 cents and asked for a lawyer "to make daddy go away."

By that time, the parents were locked in a bitter dispute — dad had fought for, and won, supervised visitation. But Mary had been told by therapist Jill Jones-Soderman, LCSW that the visits should be stopped. "I felt it was dangerous for [Crystal] to even

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[Friday September 29](#)

see her father. I believe he is highly disturbed," Jones-Soderman told The West Milford Messenger.

This is the story of a mom who has been fighting to protect her daughter. She has run through all her resources and now it appears she may be fighting a court battle without representation.

Crystal has been seeing a different therapist since 2004. On the strength of her report, visitation was stopped all together for a while, then dad fought back.

The court appointed a psychologist to evaluate Crystal. He wrote a letter to Mary's attorney in which he expressed his belief that Crystal's story was credible. Shortly thereafter, according to Jones-Soderman, the psychologist took Crystal's father on as a patient. "This is legal, but unethical," said Jones-Soderman, "because is it a portal for pay-offs." That psychologist testified in court that he felt Crystal had been coached and the father was no threat.

Jones-Soderman and the psychologist in question are currently involved in their own battle because Jones-Soderman has publicly claimed this psychologist changed his opinion in another case. That case ended in the suicide of a child who was being returned to his allegedly abusive father.

But four other professionals evaluated Crystal since this saga began and they all reported that it was their belief the little girl was telling the truth.

It would seem logical that the next step would be that the court would hear opinions on both sides. But unbeknownst to Mary, the attorney she had hired wasn't very familiar with family court. (A second lawyer, after looking at all the paperwork last week, said the mistakes made were too numerous to list). So Mary's attorney never subpoenaed anyone to testify against the court appointed psychologist.

Mary had a friend who acted as the visitation supervisor for awhile, but it eventually became too much for her. The next time they went to court, the judge agreed to continue the supervision, this time with a third-party company. For some reason an agreement was reached in which Mary bears part of the cost of the supervision. Her part runs about \$200 a week, which is a large percentage of the money she earns at her hourly wage job.

Although she had cashed in her 401k to cover attorney fees, it didn't last long and she was soon in arrears. The lawyer eventually dropped the case a few days before she was to appear in court again. She called a number of other attorneys, but the retainers were too much for her.

So she called Legal Aid. A few days later, she received a letter that said Legal Aid funding was too low and they could not take her case. Social worker Lori McGahan said she had been hearing the same thing about Legal Aid from other people in the last month.

So, if one party can afford a lawyer and the other cannot, it begs the question: Is justice being dispensed to the parent that can't afford it? When asked, McGahan sighed, "That's why some parents take their kids and run."

Crystal had a visit with her dad last weekend. This week was the biting, kicking, hitting Crystal.

Mary has a court date next week and no attorney.

Mary's mom is in the process of getting a second mortgage on her house to help out the family court system

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