

DAILY NEWS

50¢

NEW YORK'S HOMETOWN NEWSPAPER

www.nydailynews.com

OPINIONS

BE OUR GUEST

By NATASHA SANTOS

No easy answers

An abused teen's story offers insight into foster care

I always get frustrated when people who have no connection or real interest in the foster care system comment on it because it's suddenly a hot topic. The death of 7-year-old Nixzmary Brown, allegedly at the hands of her mother and stepfather, has put the city in an emotional uproar, even though I know that the number of children killed who were "known to ACS" was lower in 2005 than in 2004.

Now a lot of people are crying out for the Administration for Children's Services to act more quickly to remove children. Already, compared with last year, removals went up in January.

Recent deaths have brought on a sort of paranoia similar to the panic that gripped the city in the late 1990s, when the number of kids taken into care reached astronomical proportions (even though fatalities did not fall in response).

I was one of those kids, in foster care from age 8 until I was adopted at 14. I was relieved when the cops came. There was no food in my house. My dad was out of the picture, my mother's boyfriends abused us, and my mom was living in her own unreal world.

I really wanted a stable home but I didn't find that in foster care, either. Instead, I found an emotionally abusive foster mother. It took years for me to move into a family that was safe.

I'm not sure what the solution is. All I know is that both options have their victims.

I remember a time before she started using drugs when my mother ironed my school clothes, paid attention to my schoolwork and had food in the house. I wonder if I could have gone home if



Natasha Santos entered the foster care system at age 8 and was adopted at 14.

my family got more help.

Today, the system is better than it was when I entered care. More parents get support without losing their children to care. More children go back home to safe homes.

Those who work and live within the system want to protect those positive changes. We know the formula: Child dies, media takes an unusual interest, rhetoric stirs up public awareness, the story is recounted until ACS feels it must respond by taking action, the number of kids in care rises while the

number of fatalities stays the same, public interest falls away, the issue is forgotten — and so are the children stuck in care whose families were broken apart.

At my church last week, a knot of women discussed the Nixzmary case.

"Did you hear about the girl who was abused by her parents, and no one at ACS did anything about it, and now she is dead?"

I hurriedly walked away from their pew. I put my head down on my friend's lap and cried. I don't know why. Those tears were more than a decade late. They won't change anything. Nixzmary is dead. And I am no longer that hopeful 8-year-old Tasha.

"I know what's wrong, Tasha." A woman named Ms. Beverly pulled my shoulder, and held my

body close to hers.

"I know what happened to you, because the same thing happened to me," she said with a shaky voice.

"And no one was there to help me, either. I was all by myself."

I let her rock me, as she cried and I cried, for all the children that ACS didn't save, and for children like me who were taken from their homes and never went back.

Santos writes for *Represent*, a bi-monthly magazine written by and for teens in foster care.