



Protecting the youngest among us

SEBRING -- With a little Avon Park girl fighting for her life at All Children's Hospital in St. Petersburg who was allegedly put there by one of her caregivers, and recent cases of other little girls gone missing or found dead, the terrible consequences of child abuse are on everybody's minds.

It is because of such heartbreaking events that dedicating a month to raising awareness about child abuse is more than publicity, but an effort to promote citizen action instead.

As Judge David Langford said during a ribbon cutting ceremony Tuesday morning at the courthouse in Sebring, initiating April as Child Abuse Prevention Month, "We can't sit back and think somebody else will take care of (the problem). We need to step up and do something ourselves. We need to be vigilant. We need to be aware of the situations leading up to abuse."

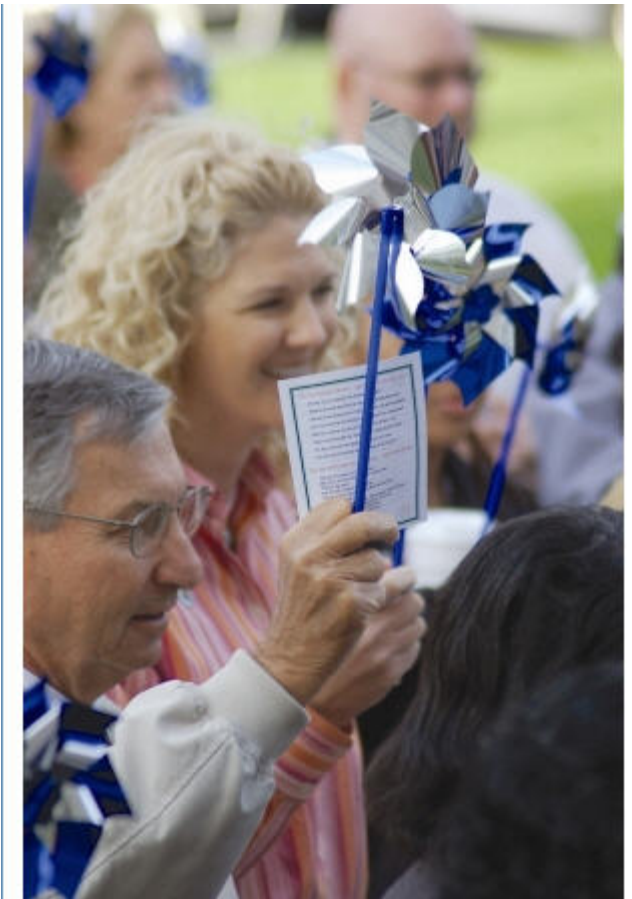
By the time families arrive in the courtroom the damage has been done, he said. The purpose of raising awareness is to encourage intervention before anyone is hurt and a family falls apart.



News-Sun photo by CHRISTOPHER TUFFLEY Kalie Christian, a third grader at Sun 'N Lake Elementary School, and Judge David Langford, cut the blue ribbon to initiate Child Abuse Prevention Month. Kalie also sang the National Anthem and "The Sun Will Come Out Tomorrow," from the musical "Annie" during the half hour ceremony held Tuesday morning on the courthouse steps.

By CHRISTOPHER TUFFLEY

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News-Sun photo by CHRISTOPHER TUFFLEY A crowd of about 50 people, many of them dedicated to the service of children, braved the chill wind Tuesday morning to show their support for Child Abuse Prevention Month. Pin wheels have become the symbol for the event, partly because they are reminiscent of childhood. The motion of the wheels also is a reminder, that action is needed to truly make a difference.



Jeff Roth, executive director of the Children's Advocacy Center, acted as master of ceremonies during the ribbon cutting initiating Child Abuse Prevention Month.



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Langford reminded the audience -- which braved a cold, stiff wind at 8 a.m. to show their support -- that families are the basic unit of society; the building blocks that create the foundation for everything else.

Helping a family grow stronger, leads to a stronger nation, he said.

Raquel Ramos, legal counsel for Child Legal Services, put the issue into practical terms.

The key to avoiding abuse, she said, is to work together on many levels.

Access to health care, affordable housing and education are tremendously important, she said. The support and involvement of extended family, friends, fellow parishioners and neighbors are the best ways to help a family build on its strengths. If you see a need, she told the audience, extend help, because volunteering can make the difference.

Volunteering can be as simple as offering a ride or to babysit, so a parent can get to a class on parenting or a job training program. Mentoring and role modeling, by offering friendship and talking about one's own experiences, can provide relief and alternatives to an otherwise overwhelmed parent.

"Be someone a family can reach out to," Ramos said. "The danger is not taking action. Remember, where there is a will, there is a way."

She reminded the audience that positive action works far better than negative judgment.

"We may sometimes say this is a bad parent, but that's not what this is about. What there is, is a person with a child -- the key to prevention is to show both children and parents a different way."

Being aware of resources is another key to prevention. The county's department of human services is currently working on a detailed directory of community services. The News-Sun will announce when and where to obtain a copy when they are ready for distribution.