

A grandmother's horror

Kassidy's murder defies logic, Nana says: 'She was so loved'

By JENNIFER L. SAUNDERS
Democrat Staff Writer

YORK, Maine — Two months after Kassidy Caitlyn Bortner was pronounced dead at York Hospital, her grandmother spoke publicly for the first time Tuesday about the child's life and the family's efforts to cope with her death.

"I will never forget her. There will not be a day in my life I won't think about her," said Jacqueline Conley, fighting to keep her voice steady as she described 21-month-old Kassidy. "She was very pretty. She had a wonderful personality. She had the most beautiful eyes and smile you'd ever want to see. ... She was the smartest thing you'd ever want to meet. She was going to be something. You just knew it."

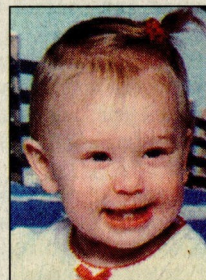
Although Conley describes herself as a very private person, she agreed to an exclusive interview with Foster's Daily

"Something that no one is saying is that Mandy loved Kassidy. As her mother, I can tell you she absolutely loved her daughter. How could she not?"

— JACQUELINE CONLEY, grandmother to abuse victim
Kassidy Bortner, mother to child's parent, Amanda Bortner

Democrat in an effort to describe what Kassidy's life was like before she became the victim of what authorities have called a "senseless" case of abuse.

In the months since Kassidy's death, her mother's boyfriend, Chad E. Evans, 29, of



KASSIDY BORTNER
Feb. '99-Nov. 2000

191 Milton Road in Rochester, N.H., has been indicted on second-degree murder and multiple assault charges involving the little girl. An indictment is not an indication of guilt; rather, it means a grand jury has found there is enough evidence to warrant a

trial.

"It's not fair that this happened to her," Conley said. "Even in her little life she's touched so many lives. I know she's in heaven. God must have had a plan for her."

When Conley received a call from authorities Nov. 9 to notify her that Kassidy was dead, she could not believe what she heard was true. Up until a few months before Kassidy's death, she explained, both the toddler and her teenage mother, Amanda Bortner, had resided with Conley, her husband and her two sons in Auburn, Maine. The family was close, Conley said, with her 16- and 7-year-old sons becoming more like brothers than uncles to

Autopsy results
still pending
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Kassidy.

Then, Conley said, a chain of events separated her from her granddaughter. The family's impending move from Auburn to Buckfield and Bortner's progressing relationship with Evans made her contact with Kassidy less frequent.

Bortner, 18, decided to take Kassidy and move to Rochester to live with Evans. Then, in September, Conley underwent a hysterectomy for a tumor.

Unable to lift or carry Kassidy, her ability to baby-sit the child became limited. Conley also explained she is unable to drive and was never able to visit Evans' Rochester home.

She said her daughter spent some time with a close friend in Texas last month and is staying with friends alternately in the Seacoast and Sanford areas. Conley said she believes Bortner is cooperating with police and not having any contact with Evans.

"Something that no one is saying is that Mandy loved Kassidy. As her mother, I can tell you she absolutely loved her daughter," Conley said. "How could she not?"

When asked if she knew why Bortner had not reported Evans' alleged abuse of Kassidy, Conley said she believes her daughter, who will turn 19 in just over a week, was a young, naive mother and that Evans was able to manipulate her.

"I think a lot of it was not under-

standing — the shock value of it," Conley said. "That's what I think. I'm hoping."

The stories of the abuse her granddaughter allegedly endured are almost too much to bear, Conley said.

"We had no idea — honestly ... I thought she was doing all right," Conley said of Bortner's decision to move in with Evans. Although she was not personally fond of Evans, Conley said she had no reason to believe at the time that he would harm Kassidy or anyone else.

In the final days of September, Conley said she spent about four days with Kassidy at her Auburn home while Bortner and Evans went to a New York Mets game.

Conley said there was not a bruise on Kassidy when the pair brought the child to her home. She also stated that Kassidy was her usual, happy self.

"It was such a special week. I didn't know how special it was. ... She called me 'Nah-Nah,' not Nana. I loved that. I loved being called Nah-Nah," Conley said. What Conley did not know at the time was that she would never again hear Kassidy call her name.

In October, Bortner brought Kassidy with her to Buckfield to pick up some papers for her job, Conley said. During that brief visit, however, she was away from the house on a road trip with her husband. When Conley

returned, her 16-year-old son was visibly shaken and expressed concern about seeing bruises on Kassidy's face.

"I freaked out," Conley said of her reaction when her son described what he had seen. She immediately called Evans' house. He was apologetic, and said Kassidy fell off a trampoline and he bruised her face when he caught the young girl.

Conley said she was not satisfied with his answer and called her older daughter, Jennifer Conley, in Kittery. She frequently baby-sat for Kassidy with her boyfriend, F. Jefferey Marshall.

"They told me they heard the same story from Amanda, and then I believed it," she said. "I wish I could have gone down there. It feels like there was a clock ticking and we couldn't stop it."

On Nov. 5, Conley recalled, both of her daughters were expected to come to Buckfield with Kassidy for a "girls day out" together. Bortner and Jennifer Conley arrived without Kassidy, telling their mother the child had gone with Evans and his two children to the zoo.

Although Conley was disappointed not to see Kassidy, she said she tried to convince herself it was important for Evans to try to foster bonds between Kassidy and his own two children. At the time, she said, it never occurred to her that the zoo would not be open at that time of

year.

Just four days later, Kassidy was dead.

"I would have taken her," Conley said. "I think about what she went through (in Rochester). She was brought up around love — people holding her, cuddling her. We told her she was a pretty girl — that we loved her. I keep thinking about her wanting to be here, and no one would bring her — and she didn't know why. ... She was so loved. We would have kept her."

Conley said it is the little things in day-to-day living that make it so difficult to pick up and go on after such a loss — like the approach of what would have been Kassidy's second birthday on Feb. 4. There was also that day in her garden as she watched Kassidy's excitement over the colors of flowers.

There were those moments when the blonde, blue-eyed toddler, sitting on her changing table, would laugh as she looked out the window at ducks in the yard. There was the family cat, Reggie, who was Kassidy's favorite pet. And, there was that Abba album Kassidy loved so much, singing and dancing in her toddler way to the song "Dancing Queen."

"She was always happy when she was with us. She was normal — playful, happy. She loved animals and she loved her family," Conley said through her tears.

"We still can't believe it."

With Kassidy gone, Conley said she cannot understand why those who saw the girl's bruises never called her — and she made a plea to anyone who has reason to suspect a child is being abused.

"Don't keep your mouth shut. Keep your eyes open. If you have any gut feeling, go with it. Tell somebody. Go to the police. Don't ignore it," she said.

Conley was there from the very start of Kassidy's life, cutting the umbilical cord in the delivery room in the moments after the little girl was born.

Less than two years later, she stood in the cemetery in Buckfield to choose a place for the same little girl to be laid to rest.

"I can't say goodbye to her," Conley said, her voice breaking as she wept. "We buried her with a doll from Jeff and Jen, a Teletubbie and the bunny I gave her at her first Christmas. And a Barbie doll from Mandy," Conley said. "It is so senseless. It is so senseless to have somebody do this. Kass will never grow up. She'll never get to play with Barbies — or have another birthday party."

Each time she hears the song "Forever Young" by Rod Stewart, Conley said, she thinks only of Kassidy's short life.

"It's so true. She's always going to be forever young. That's Kassidy."