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## Rare adoption ends with mom and kids dead

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Joe Cavaretta / Sun Sentinel

Barbara Flint, great-grandmother of the two children found dead in a canal, is comforted by Rev. Marcia Beam, left, and family friend Chuck Ridley, as she breaks down during a news conference, Wednesday.

When Jermaine McNeil was 5, the Department of Children & Families decided it best that he be raised by someone other than his mom — a woman with more than a dozen arrests and a string of fleeting relationships.

When Jermaine was 8, DCF did an about-face: Felicia Brown, stripped of her parental rights just three years earlier, was now deemed capable enough to adopt her own son from foster care.

The state sweetened the pot with an adoption subsidy worth hundreds of dollars a month.

The highly unusual adoption — at a time when Brown was known to be involved in a

dangerous love triangle — would have tragic consequences.

Jermaine and his younger sister Ju'tyra were discovered dead March 2, stuffed inside luggage floating in a canal along the Delray Beach-Boca Raton border. Their mother was dead, too, though authorities didn't know it at the time.

A "Jane Doe" body from August turned out to be Felicia Brown — identified through the names of her three children tattooed on her body.

Her body had been dumped at a West Palm Beach landfill.

Felicia Brown's off-again/on-again boyfriend, Clem Beauchamp — two-thirds of the love triangle — has been identified as a suspect in the killings. He's currently jailed on a weapons offense, but has not been charged with murder.

The case has renewed questions — raised first last month following the beating death of 10-year-old Nubia Barahona — about whether the agency's fast-tracking of potentially risky adoptions has put children in harm's way.

Adoptive parents Carmen and Jorge Barahona were approved for adoption despite concerns raised by school officials that Nubia was petrified of Carmen, who, she said, beat her feet with sandals.

“What we seem to have here is somewhat of a rush to judgment where we’re off and running to the races toward adoption – let’s get the other stuff out of the way,” children’s advocate David Lawrence Jr., said Monday on a panel studying Nubia’s death for DCF.

“Red flags ought to come up every step of the way instead of ‘we ought to get this adoption done.’”

The Barahonas were both jailed on charges of murder and child abuse after Nubia’s decomposed body was found in a garbage bag in Jorge Barahona’s truck, her twin brother burned by chemicals in the truck’s cab.

DCF, which declined to release records on the Delray Beach adoption, had been aware of the violent nature of the three-way relationship involving Brown and Beauchamp. Six months before the adoption was approved, Beauchamp’s former paramour, Michelle Dent, came to the home shared by Beauchamp and Brown and held a knife to Brown’s neck, threatening to kill her if she didn’t “stay out of my business.”

The incident was reported to the state’s child-abuse hotline, meaning DCF had a record of it.

## QUESTIONS

The deaths of the three children in such a short time span raise troubling questions about a program that has been lauded in recent years as singular evidence of Florida’s child welfare turnaround.

In the past decade, the number of Florida children adopted from foster care has more than doubled, from 1,504 in budget year 2000 to 3,368 in 2010. For the 12-month period ending June 30, Florida has so far reported 1,914 adoptions of foster children.

A large chunk of the public adoptions have taken place in South Florida – 403 for Miami-Dade and 203 in Broward for 2010, DCF records show.

The state has been rewarded for its performance, earning \$9.75 million in federal bonuses in 2009 and another \$5.7 million in 2010.

The bonuses are meant as an incentive for states to find permanent homes for foster children, so they don’t languish in state care, as had often been the case in the past.

But Florida’s success at finding “forever families” for so many foster kids also has led to criticism from Lawrence and another panel member, former U.S. Attorney Roberto Martinez, who suggested the Barahona adoption was rushed to meet a National Adoption Day deadline.

Nubia was found on Valentine’s Day in the flatbed of her adoptive father’s pickup, drenched in chemicals and stuffed in a garbage bag. Victor was inside the truck’s cab, also awash in chemicals and in the midst of a seizure. He is recovering in a therapeutic foster home.

‘A RISK’

“There is always a risk when people start thinking about numbers instead of about children,” said Adam Pertman, director of the well-regarded Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute. “The risk exists when you’re cutting budgets and it exists when you’re trying to get federal incentive dollars.... If there are states working so hard to get federal dollars that they take shortcuts, cases like this had better be a big red warning flag.”

In a prepared statement Tuesday, Palm Beach County DCF spokeswoman Elisa Cramer acknowledged the department had “prior involvement” with Brown’s children. She added: “At the time of their tragic discovery last week, there was not an open investigation involving the children. The department has not had an open child protective investigation involving the children since 2005.”

At a hearing before the state Senate’s Children, Families and Elder Affairs Committee, a DCF assistant secretary, Pete Digre, told lawmakers “nobody had reported the problems in [Beauchamp’s] home. It is something we are not aware of.”

As a child, Felicia Brown, then named Felicia Flint, was well known to Palm Beach County child protection workers. She was the subject of several abuse or neglect reports and was placed in foster care herself.

Brown was only 14 — and in foster care — when Jermaine was born on March 18, 2000.

Within the next three years, five separate reports were filed with the state’s child abuse hotline naming both Felicia and Jermaine as victims. The reports ran the gamut: poor supervision, physical abuse, beatings and excessive corporal punishment. Three of the five complaints were closed with at least some evidence to support the allegations, and Jermaine, like his mother, became a foster child.

In the midst of that, Brown gave birth to her second child, who is not being named to protect her privacy, in May 2002. Brown, still a foster child, ran away with the baby. When the girl was later found, she was taken from her mother and placed in foster care. In September 2003, Brown surrendered her rights to her daughter, who was later adopted by her foster family.

The same summer that the girl was adopted, in 2003, Brown was given visitation with Jermaine, with an eye toward being reunified with the youngster. Jermaine was returned to his mom in October 2004, but removed again by child protection workers a month later.

## THE YOUNGEST

Brown’s youngest child, Ju’tyra, was born at the end of 2004, and taken immediately to live with her paternal grandmother.

In August 2005, Brown gave up all parental rights to Jermaine. But three years later, child welfare administrators, convinced that Brown had turned her life around, allowed her to adopt the boy from foster care. She was given a monthly subsidy to help raise the boy. She also had regained custody of Ju’tyra.

The adoption was unusual on many levels.

Still rare, adoptions by birth parents grew out of a movement to find permanent homes for adolescent foster children at risk of spending their entire childhoods in state care, said Susan Smith, the adoption institute's program director. Most such adoptions so far have involved older children.

Pertman, the institute's executive director, said states should look very cautiously at approving adoptions among parents who previously had lost their rights, because parental right terminations generally occur only in severe cases. "You can't return a child into potentially unsafe circumstances," Pertman said.

Second, with a criminal history that included 16 arrests, and a child protection history that was well-known to authorities, Brown would not have come close to meeting state standards for the adoption of a foster child.

And then, there was the incident involving the knife to the throat.

Michelle Dent, the third member of the triangle, menaced Brown inside the home Brown shared with Beauchamp, saying, "I will kill you if you don't stay out of my business" — an apparent reference to a custody battle over children shared by Beauchamp and Dent. Brown had appeared at a court hearing involving the dispute.

DCF's investigation into the March 2008 incident was closed five months before Jermaine's adoption with "some indicators" that the children were at risk.

## CRIMINAL RECORDS

All three members of the triangle had significant criminal histories.

Dent's record includes four arrests, including charges of aggravated battery, larceny, check fraud and aggravated assault. None of the arrests led to a conviction, though Dent pleaded guilty in 2004 to the auto theft.

Beauchamp had been arrested five times, including charges of robbery, aggravated assault with a deadly weapon, home invasion, contempt of court, and marijuana possession. Beauchamp appears to have only one conviction, for aggravated assault. He is in jail now on a federal weapons charge.

And Brown had been arrested 16 times during her 24-year life, including for battery, burglary, marijuana possession, shoplifting, robbery and auto theft. All but four occurred when she was a juvenile, and records do not specify the dispositions.

In August 2010, the "Jane Doe" body believed to be Brown's was found in a West Palm Beach landfill.

Seven months after "Jane Doe" was found, the adoption subsidy checks were still being cashed, The Herald has learned.

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