

[print](#) | [close](#)



The foster child thought she had nobody left to love her, but she was wrong

By Nancy Cambria

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

Sunday, Oct. 25 2009

ST. LOUIS - The search begins inside a sparse office in a corner of the St. Louis family court.

Carlos Lopez, a 6-foot private investigator with a disarming smile, and his partner Sheila Suderwalla sit at a computer side by side, scouring court records, police files, motor vehicle records, occupancy permits and mug shots - any clue that would lead them to a woman named Karen.

Karen is not a wanted criminal. And the partners are not looking to solve a crime.

Suderwalla, a petite social worker with a driven passion for the underdog, and Lopez are on the trail of something far more elusive: a lost relative with a heart big enough and bloodlines strong enough to change the life of a 15-year-old foster child.

Her name is Lisa, and she feels as if she has nobody.

Lisa doesn't know it yet, but she is at the center of a groundbreaking \$2 million federally funded St. Louis program called Extreme Recruitment, one of the first programs in the nation that partners social workers with private investigators in a gumshoe effort to reunite foster children with long-lost family members.

For generations, finding permanent homes for many teenage foster children such as Lisa has been largely a futile exercise because few are willing to adopt older children. So caseworkers often settle for a hodgepodge of foster care placements.

Extreme Recruitment takes a different approach.

When Suderwalla and Lopez were handed Lisa's case, they plunged headlong into a fast-paced forensic search through her past.

They dissected the slim list of her known relatives, researched them and used any connection they could to build a list of people who might potentially step up for Lisa.

For two weeks they have knocked on doors, chased clues and hit dead ends. Now they have a fresh lead: a woman named Karen who they were told might know a lot about the girl's past.

The partners also have something else: a proven track record.

In as much as 70 percent of cases, Extreme Recruitment has permanently reunited foster children with relatives. In almost all other cases, the program has at least helped children reconnect with family.

It happened for Dereck, 17.

When Lopez and Suderwalla got his file, he had lived in 16 places. He was weeks away from graduating from high school with just a caseworker to attend the ceremony. The partners found a great-aunt in Indiana who began calling relatives in St. Louis. By Dereck's graduation he had eight family members in the audience.

"I was able to tell him, I want you to know you have some stand-up people in your family, " Suderwalla said.

Extreme Recruiting has been so successful, it has teamed up with the Missouri Children's Division and 19 private agencies to expand. In four years it aims to connect 150 St. Louis foster teens with willing relatives.

"You can only sit behind a desk for so long, " explained Melanie Scheetz, executive director of the Foster & Adoptive Care Coalition, which created the program. "That is the big difference between our program and most everything else that is going on around the country."

THEIR FIRST LEAD

Everything Suderwalla and Lopez know so far about Lisa they carry in an

overstuffed leather folder.

Inside is a white sheet of paper that holds a growing blueprint of Lisa's still mysterious family tree.

They call it a genome, and the pair is building it, branch by branch, with every clue they find. It already holds 60 half brothers and sisters, distant cousins, aunts and uncles. Some are dead. One is in prison. Another is a wealthy uncle who'd fled his past.

Somewhere amid the branches is a spot for Karen. But where? And the tree holds other mysteries. There is a nickname they've heard that lingers as a clue. Somewhere out there is a relative named Peaches.

And yet Suderwalla and Lopez cannot ask Lisa for help - they have yet to even meet her. The program does not want to raise a child's hopes too soon.

They know enough about Lisa from her case file and others to worry. They were told she was living in residential care because her foster placements had failed. She was losing faith in adults.

Suderwalla and Lopez were warned that too many adults had let her down. She was the last of her siblings without a home. If something wasn't done, she was likely to "age out" of foster care with no family ties.

"If we just continue to have her in foster care until she ages out, she is going to look for a sense of belonging, and most likely it will be with the wrong influences," Suderwalla says.

Suderwalla is used to diving into causes. She graduated from Principia College in Elsah and headed a West Coast activist group on homelessness and poverty for years. Later, she found working with minorities in foster care her calling. Few understand that they are just kids needing the same unconditional love she got growing up in Toronto, she said.

"I can't imagine a child not having even a little bit of what I've had," she says.

For a decade, Lopez had been a St. Louis detective assigned to juvenile crime, winning trust with an upbeat voice and friendly handshake that played down his role as a cop. Once he solved a kidnapping where the key clue was a Mickey

Mouse ring with a missing ear. But Lopez says cracking cases was a Band-Aid for problems that needed surgery. This, he says, "is something where we can actually fix something."

"It's healing, " adds Suderwalla.

As Suderwalla and Lopez sit, eyes on the computer screen, they rule out several different Karens who had the same last name. Some are the wrong race; one is the wrong age. None leads to Lisa.

Within a few keystrokes, the pair has a hit. A Karen with the correct last name appears in an arrest report of a young man. He has listed her as an emergency contact.

"Wait, " says Suderwalla. "He's on our genome."

Suderwalla plucks Lisa's family tree from the leather folder.

She runs her nail along several branches. Her finger stops. Yes, she nods her head. He is also on Lisa's family tree. This is their Karen - and next to her name is a recent address.

"She has got to be a connection on the dad's side of the family, " Suderwalla says. If she can't take in Lisa, she might lead them to the person who could.

KNOCKING ON DOORS

There are three doors next to each other in the apartment complex. The one with Karen's address stands in the middle. The partners don't hesitate to knock. They have done this before.

Once Lopez told a woman she had a younger sister she'd never met who had been put into foster care as a baby. Her sister had died. But she had a son who was now a teen in foster care.

Some people cry, but many are angry.

"They see it as, 'Well, you've ripped our family apart, and now you want us to help fix it?' So we have to tell people we're not the system, " Suderwalla says. "We have to apologize."

Sometimes they find people such as Yolanda "Neicy" Walker, who hugged them when

they came to her door. For years she prayed for the return of a lost second cousin who disappeared into foster care a decade ago.

Walker now plans to adopt the girl. She said her family always had room for the child, but no one in the system ever asked. "It messed us up, " she said. "I didn't get a chance to be asked if I would or wouldn't."

Lopez knocks on the middle door several times; nobody answers.

They knock on the other doors. One of them opens, revealing the silhouette of a teen. A minute later the pair jog back to the car. The teen is Karen's daughter.

"She said, 'That's my momma, ' and gave us Karen's phone number, " Suderwalla says almost breathlessly. Within minutes they are on Karen's doorstep.

Karen smiles widely and lets them right in, but she is guarded.

"If we don't find someone that's appropriate for her to connect with, you know what's going to happen, " Lopez says gently.

Karen nods. She recounts what she knows about Lisa's past.

Karen's aunt and uncle had taken in Lisa and her half sister when they were toddlers, she says. Their birth mother had abandoned them. Lisa and her sister were folded into a huge blended family. Karen's aunt had taken in at least 10 foster kids and formally adopted about half.

But Karen, a frequent visitor, witnessed more at her aunt and uncle's than any social worker could. She says the younger children, including Lisa, suffered years of mistreatment.

She and Khristine hated going over there, she says. They were appalled at what they saw.

"Khristine?" Suderwalla asks.

She is sitting by a coffee table, adding new names to Lisa's family tree.

Khristine was a cousin who had just moved back to St. Louis from Chicago, Karen says. The pair had an arrangement, Karen says. She'd call Khristine and tell her the things she'd seen in their aunt and uncle's home. Khristine would call Missouri's child abuse hot line.

"I was the eyes, " Karen says. "Khristine made the calls."

But it wasn't until three years ago, after Karen's aunt had died, that the children were removed permanently from the home by the children's division, says Karen. By law, the Missouri Children's Division cannot comment on any foster child's case file, though Suderwalla's agency has confirmed that the surviving parent lost custody in 2006.

There is a brief pause. A television drones in the background. Karen smiles again, but she looks tired from talking. She's just gotten off work. It's a good job. She has five children. A grandchild plays on her knee.

"We really apologize about what happened, " Suderwalla says.

Suderwalla and Lopez can see Karen's heart is in the right place. She can certainly help. But can Karen's busy life take on another child? Suderwalla asks who else might be willing to help Lisa.

"Talk to Khristine, " Karen says confidently and writes down her phone number.

Three days later, Suderwalla and Lopez meet with Lisa's formal team of social workers, therapists, advocates and court officials for a weekly update on her case. Suderwalla carefully tells the group about Karen and Khristine.

She does not ask why Khristine's hot line calls were dismissed or how a state-licensed foster home that was abusive could take in so many children for so many years.

Extreme Recruitment isn't about assigning blame for the past, Suderwalla would say later, but making connections for a foster child's future. This was a group who had been working with Lisa for years and shared current information and opinions about who would be right for her. On this day something clicks.

At least one social worker knows of a family member called Peaches, but

Suderwalla had not put the two names together until now. Suddenly it makes sense.

"It sounds like Peaches is Khristine, " Suderwalla tells the group. "And Khristine is someone that (Lisa) trusted."

ARMS OF AN ANGEL

They find her at a Family Dollar store.

Khristine Williams, 40, a mother of two grown children, reluctantly returned to St. Louis after being laid off from a longtime job in Chicago. She was getting back on her feet and took a job at the store because it had health benefits.

It would have been easier to turn Suderwalla away when she called her cell phone this morning. Khristine had for years distanced herself from her extended family. She had told only a few of her relatives that she had moved back to town. Some of them blamed her for breaking up her aunt and uncle's family. Did she really want to open this door?

But Lisa was a part of her past she just couldn't shake. She had taken Lisa to Chicago for visits. Lisa called her Peaches.

So here she stands, in the middle of a store full of tube socks and hair scrunchies, with two strangers.

She grips a nearby shopping cart. She fears they are going to tell her that Lisa is pregnant. But Suderwalla has something else to say.

"She's the last one, " Suderwalla says. All of the other children with her aunt and uncle have been successfully placed in homes.

Khristine brushes the copper and gold braids from her face and takes a quiet breath. For a moment she looks angry, but her eyes grow sad.

It was unfair that Lisa was all alone- the younger children in that home suffered, she says.

She says Lisa's birth sister was locked in the closet for hours at a time. Once

Khristine set up a hairstylist for the girls, but later found Lisa's sister's hair ruined. Someone at the home had thrown water on her head and told her she was ugly. A slut. The girl was 12.

Khristine starts to cry.

Lopez turns quickly and walks off, returning with a handful of paper towels. Suderwalla draws in closer.

Khristine takes the tissue and wipes her eyes. "I'm sorry, " she says. "I was abused as a child."

She says she told adults about it, but was ignored. It was the same way with Lisa and the other children, she says. Police came to her aunt and uncle's door many times, but nothing ever happened.

"Why would they just leave?" Khristine says, her voice rising. "Those kids had to ask, 'Why do they just leave?' They knew. These kids just knew. It wasn't right."

When the state took custody, Khristine says, she tried to help.

"I wanted to adopt them, " she says of Lisa and her sister. A social worker told her it would take three years because she lived in Chicago.

"No, no, no, " mutters Suderwalla, shaking her head so her hair swings. "More like three months."

They stand fixed in a triangle at the center of the store. It is quiet, but for a song on tinny speakers.

"In the arms of an angel far away from here, " the singer lulls. "In the arms of an angel; You may find some comfort here."

Lopez thinks to himself, it's a sign. He and Suderwalla try not to put their hopes in one person. But they usually know when they've found the one who will take charge of the destiny of a child. Have they found her here?

It is time to ask.

"Would you be willing to be a part of her life?" Suderwalla says.

Khristine Williams sifts the question in her mind.

Her life had already taken her far away from here. She had only reluctantly come back to St. Louis. There are no guarantees she can make it work with Lisa. But now she knows she is deeply needed here.

"Yes, " she says. "I will."

AT THE VERY BEGINNING

It is a week later, and Suderwalla clips in high heels into a conference room crowded with 13 social workers, therapists, court advocates and others. Lisa's case is far from closed. There will be family counseling, visits, weeks of meetings and court dates before Khristine can take Lisa home. The target date is December.

Suderwalla clutches a new case file.

"OK. We're not going to look back, " she tells the group as she stands near a blank flip chart, ready to record the first clues. "And we're not going to lay blame or ask what should have been done differently."

The group begins.

This foster child is 11. She has lived in 11 different placements.

The girl has few friends. She is seeking approval from older girls. She is dressing promiscuously. She is traumatized. She had seen her mom kill her dad.

Suderwalla stops. She needs them to start at the very beginning.

"OK, " she says. "Who knows how to spell her name?"

If you enjoy reading about interesting news, you might like the 3 O'Clock Stir from STLtoday.com. Sign up and you'll receive an email with unique stories of the day, every Monday-Friday, at no charge.

Sign up at <http://newsletters.stltoday.com>

