

My Turn: Ray McKenna: Stepping up to protect the children



It was late on an October evening in 1849, “during the cold north east storm,” when a young girl rang the front doorbell of Walter R. Danforth’s house. Danforth, who would be elected mayor of Providence four years later, was surprised to see the drenched 10-year-old Katy Conly standing there, “without bonnet or shoes and otherwise poorly clad.”

Katy, the daughter of Irish famine immigrants, was seeking refuge from her abusive parents by going to the home where an aunt was living as a servant of the Danforth family. In a letter to the City Council, Danforth wrote: “the girl was in a suffering condition and I directed that she should be comfortably provided for and kept through the night. I made enquiries about her conditions and found that she had never been put to school, but was sent round through the day to gather fuel, and that she was not treated kindly at home.”

Danforth brought young Katy to the Children’s Friends Society home, where they found a family that would provide for her.

There were ups and downs with Katy, whom caretakers described as “wicked, naughty and dishonest.” She also made an occasional “pilgrimage” by running away. Taking care of such an abused child was not easy work, and success was not a straight line.

Young Katy was one of hundreds of children living on the streets of Providence in 1849. Some, like Mary and Catherine Driscoll, ages three and five, lived in the woods and “maintained themselves by begging.” First brought to Dexter Asylum, the city’s poorhouse, the Driscoll sisters were taken in by the Children’s Friends Society. Andrew and John Hanley were likewise aided by the Society. Their father, William, was imprisoned for life for murdering his wife and their mother.

In one regard, Katy was a very lucky girl. Fifteen years earlier, Harriet Ware, a teacher in Fox Point, had spearheaded the creation of an organization that would look out for the well-being of the many children in the city who were homeless, abused or neglected. At the time, Providence was awash in suffering. The Irish famine devastated the island from 1845 to 1852 and resulted in thousands of desperate immigrants arriving in Providence. Families had been broken up by death, disease and the myriad of physical and mental ailments brought on by the famine and the desperate migration that resulted.

They found a hard life in the burgeoning factories. Fourteen-hour shifts, five-and-a-half days a week in noisy and dangerous factories produced unhealthy individuals and damaged families. Dexter Asylum and Butler Asylum, the city’s home for the mentally damaged, were full of Irish immigrants.

Harriet Ware created a home where as many as 40 children could live at a time. From the home, children would be “indentured out” to families to learn a trade or otherwise earn their keep while they were able to experience a stable family life.

The work that the Children’s Friends Society did for girls like Katy, the Driscoll girls and the Hanley boys is still being done today in Providence. Children’s Friends takes in children and does much more. As David Caprio, President and CEO of Children’s Friends, wrote in the 2014 Annual Report, “Much has changed since 1834 (when) a small group of concerned women stepped up to protect our most vulnerable children; however one constant has remained the same: a committed community can make the difference and the Children’s Friends community is making a positive difference. While we are very much committed to helping children who are victims of abuse and neglect, the majority of our work today is focused on community-based prevention efforts.”

The Providence of Katy Conly’s time could be a cruel place for the vulnerable. The same is true today. But Rhode Island is a better place for the good work that the Children’s Friends continues to do more than 180 years from its founding.

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