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Child abuse fight up to you

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Growing up in Philadelphia, Richard Gold had at least four mothers.

He had his real mother. And then he had the neighbor ladies who kept an eye on him - and other children - in their close-knit city neighborhood.

Mr. Gold grew up to be director of the state office of Children, Youth and Families, which oversees county Children and Youth Services offices, and he laments that today too many children don't really even have one mother.

We could probably have counted Darisabel Baez among those essentially motherless children. She was brutally beaten to death by Harve Johnson in April 2008 as her mother, Neida Baez, sat by and did nothing to stop the abuse. Both are now in jail. And our community is left to ask what should have been done to prevent this tragic death?

That was the question that hung in the air at the Jewish Community Center Thursday evening as YorkCounts sponsored a symposium, featuring the heartbreaking documentary "Carrying Darisabel" by photojournalist Jason Plotkin and other York Daily Record/Sunday News staffers.

The answer, of course, is not simple.

But one thing became obvious during the 2½-hour discussion among the many invited panelists - along with questions and comments from the more than 250 in the audience: Government and other private-sector "programs" cannot stop child abuse.

It's up to everyone in our community.

It's up to family members and friends.

It's up to neighbor ladies (and men).

It's up to teachers and

child care providers.

It's up to people in the grocery store who witness children being abused.

It's up to you.

And yes, obviously, it's also up to government - case workers, police, prosecutors, social service agencies, etc. - to follow through and protect our most helpless citizens.

The "it takes a village" cliché was referenced several times Thursday evening. It may be trite, but it's also right - at least when it comes to detecting and stopping child abuse.

Is our modern-day, high-tech village doing its job? Sadly, in too many cases - Darisabel's among them - the answer is no. We're buried in our TVs and our wireless gadgets and our

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superficial "social" networks online. We don't connect enough on a human level. We don't get involved when our guts tell us something is wrong. We rationalize that it's none of our business.

And then we look for someone to blame when some innocent 2-year-old is bludgeoned to death by a man who himself was abused as a child.

Look up from your iPhone. Look around at your "neighborhood," where you might not even know your neighbors. Look in the mirror.

Noting the "camouflage" of old bruises and new contusions found on Darisabel, indicating long-term abuse, Mr. Gold asked: Where were the family members and neighbors? Did no one hear? Did no one think to report the injuries?

Aaron Anderson, a York city pastor who knew Darisabel, her mother and family, shed some light Thursday on those questions, which have been asked by many in the wake of the killing: Neida Baez was not wholly without a support network that might have intervened. But when she started a relationship with Harve Johnson, she moved away from that network, isolated herself and her daughter.

"We need to pursue each other, love and help each other," he said, expressing regret that the community could not maintain the contact that might have saved Darisabel. "Our M.O. is to leave each other alone - and we can't do that."

No, we can't.

Our community is "rich with programs" to help prevent and stop child abuse. Officials at the form commented that they do a pretty good job with limited resources. In the future, the community can turn its focus on some needed systemic improvements as a plan of action to combat child abuse is formed.

But those systems can't fully do their jobs unless we, as conscientious members of a caring community, do our jobs.

Reach out to parents - particularly young parents who can easily be overwhelmed by responsibilities and the challenges of raising difficult children. Let them know you're willing to help.

Report suspected abuse.

Don't let uncertainty, fear that an abuser will know you reported him or her, or the feeling that "it's none of my business," get in the way.

It is your business to protect the helpless.

If we are serious as a community about preventing the slaughter of innocents, everybody needs at least four mothers.

Will you be somebody's other mother - or father?

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