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## Christie Blatchford: 'I was a liar and they were incompetent': Phoenix Sinclair inquiry gets shot of unvarnished truth

*There are no heroes in the Phoenix Sinclair story now unravelling at the provincial inquiry into her death, but a man who tells the truth and who loved that little girl is close enough to count*

Christie Blatchford

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Mike Deal/Winnipeg Free Press

WINNIPEG — There are no heroes in the Phoenix Sinclair story now unravelling at the provincial inquiry into her death, but a man who tells the unvarnished truth and who loved that little girl is close enough to count.

This is Rohan (pronounced Ron) Stephenson, the 42-year-old who was for much of Phoenix's short life one-half of the couple who acted as her parents and who, when he and his wife split up, took over the *in loco parentis* role on his own.

He testified Thursday.

Mr. Stephenson was married to Kim Edwards when one or another of the little girl's profoundly troubled young parents began dropping her off for babysitting.

At first, he said with trademark frankness, he "wasn't thrilled" to have a baby added to the ranks of those already living in his small house — he and Ms. Edwards and their two boys — in the city's hardscrabble north end.

But over time, as babysitting stints turned to more frequent stays and they turned to full-time care, Mr. Stephenson came to adore the little girl he called "Mount Fatty Boom-Boom," because she was such a chunk, and who called him "Big Guy" in return, even though she couldn't say the "Big" part very well.

By early 2004, Mr. Stephenson had Phoenix virtually all the time.

Her father, Steve Sinclair, was a drinker, and by this point was irregularly in his daughter's life, and much of the time Mr. Stephenson didn't even know where he was. The same was true of Phoenix's mum, Samantha Kematch. The young people partied hard ("partying" is the inquiry euphemism for getting blind drunk), were unemployed and on social assistance.

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Now, Mr. Stephenson sees himself as being on the margins of society, but he was and is nothing like Mr. Sinclair or Kematch.



Mike Aporius/Winnipeg Free Press files

He has never been on welfare. He was working back then as a caregiver for quadriplegics; he works in private child care now. He and his family have had no dealings with child welfare.

But as a low-income guy from the wrong part of town, he and Mr. Sinclair had things in common, among them a natural distrust of police and government agencies, especially the Winnipeg Child and Family Services, which in Mr. Stephenson's observation specializes in "breaking families, not fixing them."

So when he and Ms. Edwards broke up in early 2003, by which time they were both well and truly smitten with Phoenix, they didn't tell the CFS they had parted. They wanted, as he put it, "to increase the chances of Phoenix" being allowed to stay with him.

"We just didn't want her to go to some foster home," he said. "We just wanted to keep her. It was pretty simple, as complicated as it is."

None of this would matter a whit had things continued along normally, and all of it was for the benefit of the little girl.

But in April of 2004, Kematch showed up with her mother Bertha, wanting to take Phoenix out for a bit.

Mr. Stephenson was reluctant to let her go. He learned only much later that Kematch wasn't merely distanced from and neglectful of Phoenix, but also actively cruel to her, and that the grandmother was as he put it "a crack head," but still he was reluctant.

But he was exhausted too — those months of working nights and playing with Phoenix all day had taken their toll — and she was excited at the prospect of an outing.

“I thought Sam would get sick of her after two days,” he said, just as she had before, that she would bring back a slightly changed little girl (Phoenix was always different after a visit with mummy, Mr. Stephenson once told the RCMP), usually one with head lice.

This time, Kematch didn't return with Phoenix, but disappeared off the edge of the world with her.

## *'We can all agree: I was a liar and they were incompetent and 15,000 other circumstances came together, and Phoenix is dead'*

The little girl was killed by her mother and her lover, Karl Wes McKay, both of whom were convicted of first-degree murder in 2008, two years after what was left of Phoenix's body was discovered at the reserve dump at the Fisher Lake First Nation north of Winnipeg. She was five at the estimated time of her death — June of 2005.

The state of her remains made it difficult for pathologists to ascertain even the cause of death, other than that she had multiple injuries, including a skull fracture.

Evidence at the murder trial showed the little girl had suffered terribly, was beaten, shot at with a BB gun, forced to eat her own vomit and confined to a basement pen.

If Mr. Stephenson had confessed to the CFS that Ms. Edwards wasn't living there, that he was working nights at the care home, that his two boys were “taking turns going late to school” so that he could get home to look after Phoenix, it was unlikely the CFS would have allowed the little girl to stay with them.

So he didn't tell, and the agency, by the evidence the inquiry has heard thus far, didn't ask many questions: Unspoken, they worked out their own don't ask, don't tell policy.

In cross-examination by Kris Saxberg, lawyer for Manitoba's uber-child welfare agency ominously called the General Authority, Mr. Stephenson admitted that his failure to fill in the CFS “probably did hinder the flow of information,” though, he noted wryly, “a little bit of interest from anyone [at CFS] would have uncovered most of this anyway.

“I was not conveying information to CFS and if I had conveyed it, they may or may not have acted in the same way,” he said.

He said he wasn't trying to blame the agency, and that he shoulders a portion of responsibility himself, or, as Mr. Stephenson put it with the special ruthlessness that a human being can direct only to himself, “We can all agree: I was a liar and they [the CFS] were incompetent and 15,000 other circumstances came together, and Phoenix is dead.”

It is a dreadful précis from a good and honourable man. It is a real comfort to imagine that little girl not in her basement pen, but rather as Mount Fatty Boom-Boom, being smooched and cuddled by the Big Guy.

*Postmedia News*

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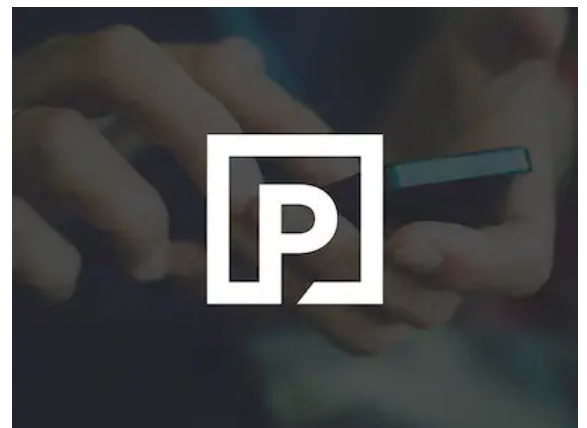
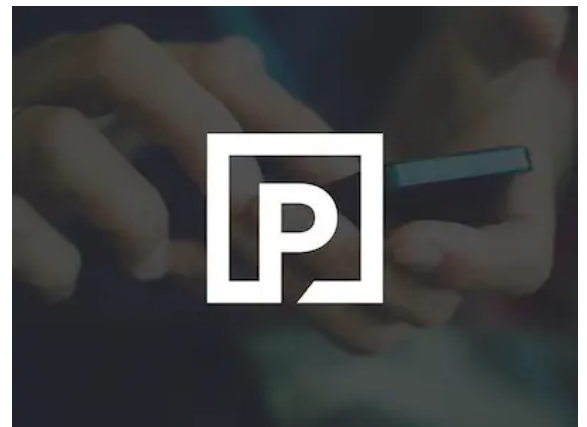
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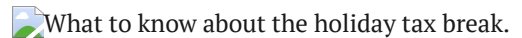


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