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Advocate for children whom society has failed

Binders as fat as phone books are piled high atop Nadeem Bezar's desk. Amassed for a civil trial since 10-year-old Ethan Okula's death, thousands of pages worth of court documents are what it takes to detail how many people let this kid down.

It's all the paperwork and scrutiny and concern his case should have garnered while he was still alive.

Bezar is a lawyer for Kline & Specter, and he specializes in these types of cases. The children whom the system fails. The ones who need the most attention, and sometimes, heartbreakingly, get the least.

Ethan died in July 2016 of a stomach ailment that went unrecognized by a school nurse and ignored by a foster mother who now faces criminal charges.

Bezar took the case in 2017, in the hope of winning civil damages against the child welfare agencies that placed Ethan with that foster mother and failed to make **See CHILDREN on B2**



Lawyer Nadeem Bezar specializes in filing cases on behalf of children who have been abused or neglected. DAVID SWANSON / FILE PHOTOGRAPH



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COMMENTARY | BY MIKE NEWALL

A voice for children many failed

CHILDREN from 31 sure that his special needs — a serious stomach condition, hearing aids, asthma, and cognitive disabilities — were being cared for. He represents children like Ethan, whose parents have lost their parental rights and who have been failed by so many. The cases can be brought to him by a family member who isn't estranged or an advocate. Before settlements, the children's estates sometimes consist only of the garbage bags of belongings they carry with them from homes to homes. Ethan's belongings didn't even fill one, Bezar says. At his last placement, he arrived with a few changes of clothes.

The attorney's vastcase print is an unusual one. With so much turnover in the city's child system, he retains institutional memory of the worst cases of neglect and abuse — a through line of failures, of the children who slip through the cracks. And of the lessons that can be gleaned from the tragedy.

His first child welfare case was on behalf of the surviving siblings of Frenchia Bennett, the 17-year-old South Philadelphia girl who was starved, whipped, and punished by her father even after the city Department of Human Services closed her case. That case became a touchstone in Bezar's struggle to right his child welfare system.

Five years later, Bezar is still busy as ever. And Ethan's case is a new touchstone — one that has been that even after so much needed reform, new ways to identify our shortfalls, systematic failures still take place.

He's seen the worst cases, the ones where he feels he's "looking into the eye of a monster." Repeat sexual and physical abuse. Cases where children were being sexually assaulted and were then returned to the home where it happened. "Imagine having to get out of that car, if you were that kid," he said. Foster parents with years-long shop riffs. A father who shut a child and then tried to blame it on her sibling.



Ethan Okula, 10, died in 2016 of a stomach ailment that went unrecognized by a school nurse and was ignored by a foster mother. Nadeem Bezar took Ethan's case in 2017 in the hope of winning civil damages against the child welfare agencies that failed him. A settlement was announced recently.
NEWALL/NEWALL

But in Ethan's case, there's no single monster. There's just neglect at every level.

On Friday, Bezar filed the heavy binder at his Center City office and began to flip through the pages. It reads like a merry-go-round of missed opportunity. Northeast Treatment Center, which placed Ethan with a foster mother whose licensing had lapsed and who was unqualified to meet his medical needs. (Employees later filed a lawsuit in his records.) Turning Point, the subcontractor charged with visiting him at home, which bungled his medical care. The foster mother herself, and the school officials who failed to get him the help he needed on the lay days. "I can't deny the whole system," Bezar says. "It can't deny the whole system." In his office, Bezar cleared the files off his desk. To make room for the next case.

The office, he represents the children who no one did. Ethan's estate is now worth \$5 million, thanks to a settlement announced this past week with the agencies linked with his care. The sole beneficiary is his little brother, who's still in foster care.

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