

CUSTODY BATTLE

Lewd Photos Prompt Additional Charges, Affidavits Unsealed in Vasquez Case

by Nick Welsh

Former childcare provider Sylvia Vasquez, already charged with child abuse involving three of her four adopted children, faced additional abuse charges Monday after the court learned that Vasquez's digital camera contained "several lascivious, nude, or partially nude photos" of her 12-year-old adopted daughter. Vasquez was arrested on January 6 when child protective service workers and sheriff's deputies found three adopted children ranging in age from 6 to 14 living in squalid conditions at her Foothill Road residence; a 14-year-old boy was confined to a downstairs closet with a bucket for a toilet, while a 10-year-old girl was apparently sleeping in a crudely constructed cage.

In light of the nude photo revelations, Judge Joseph Lodge imposed tighter restrictions on Vasquez's movements and ability to communicate with her four children — currently in protective custody — or any other witnesses in the case. "[The case] seems to have gotten much more serious," Lodge said. And given new reports that Vasquez, who owns three residential properties in Santa Barbara, also owns four condominiums in Mexico, Lodge said, "She [Vasquez] might feel it's time to go to Mexico."

On Tuesday, attorney Michael Cooney, representing the *Santa Barbara News-Press* and KEYT News, persuaded Judge Ochoa to unseal affidavits for a search warrant of Vasquez's home and the bail report assessing whether Vasquez posed a flight risk. According to the contents of those affidavits, the 6-year-old girl reported she was fed nothing but peanut butter; the 14-year-old boy was locked downstairs and forbidden

from playing with the other children because he was "sick," according to Vasquez. Meanwhile, the 12-year-old girl, who lived in a comfortable bedroom upstairs, told authorities that Vasquez warned her that the other children were "dangerous and manipulative" and that they would "stick things in her private parts." In addition, the search warrant yielded allegations offered by a Child Protective Services worker claiming that, years earlier, Vasquez passed herself off as a social worker in Mexico and abducted several children there in separate incidents; those children were reportedly returned to Mexico.

Vasquez's attorneys, Catherine Swyson and Robert Sanger, were not available for comment. But as Vasquez emerged from court Monday, her eldest son William blistered prosecuting attorney Joyce Dudley as "an evil lady telling a lot of lies." As Vasquez wiped away tears, her son William claimed that Vasquez's children, at least three of them, had been diagnosed with Reactive Attachment Disorder (RAD), adding that their separation from Vasquez would make matters worse. Sometimes mistaken for autism, RAD is a recognized affliction common to abused and foster children who never forged fundamental human bonds with adult caregivers or parents. Medical journals describe RAD as "markedly disturbed and developmentally inappropriate social relatedness in most contexts" resulting from "grossly pathological care." Individuals with RAD have been described as "affectionless psychopaths"; experts say it's not uncommon for those with RAD to be highly manipulative and aggressive.

Friends of Vasquez contended the former childcare provider struggled heroically to deal with an impossible situation, even sending her 14-year-old adopted son off for an 18-month stint at a private institution in Utah specializing in behavioral problems. Vasquez's father, Juvenal Vasquez, issued a statement demanding, "Why wasn't my daughter given special counsel and help in the difficult task of raising these children? I was present when a Christian psychologist said there was no cure for this disorder. But my daughter, loving them so much, attempted to rehabilitate them in the best way she knew. For that genuine act of love, she is paying a terrible price."

Leaving the courthouse Tuesday, Vasquez insisted she sought help for her children and was ignored. "No one wanted to help," she complained. But according to Anna Kokotovic of nonprofit agency Child Abuse Listening and Mediation (CALM), her agency operates two programs that might have provided help. RAD, said Kokotovic, is a serious but not insoluble personality problem typically triggered by abuse, neglect, and multiple foster-home placements by an early age. "We have intensive homecare programs for [RAD kids]. Wherever and whenever the need arises, we're prepared 24/7 to do whatever it takes." Currently, CALM is working with roughly 10 families dealing with RAD issues. Vasquez, said Kokotovic, has never approached CALM for help.

Vasquez is next scheduled to appear in court in Santa Barbara on February 17 to set the date for the preliminary hearing. ■