A very private residence

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By Cathy Conrad June 18, 2019

In 2005, Arlan Kaufman and his wife Linda went on trial in Wichita, Kan., on federal charges that included Medicare fraud and involuntary servitude. A friend of mine attended the trial with the intention of writing a book about it.

If my friend had written the book as she once intended, I certainly would have read it. Instead, in the course of a 2018 visit to my home in Albuquerque, N.M., she casually mentioned that her book would never be written. When I displayed curiosity about the subject matter, she offered to send me the materials she had gathered, as well as a couple of early drafts of her proposed book. Once I had perused her material, I began to consider how I might help her to tell the story.

However, my friend has had a lifelong struggle with bipolar disorder. As a young woman, in the 1970s, she was hospitalized at Prairie View in Newton, Kan. She was aware that, had circumstances been just a little different, she herself might have gone from Prairie View to one of the Kaufman houses. This was a disquieting realization. It was also disturbing for her to recognize that the small Mennonite community where she lived might not be understanding either of her illness or of her efforts to expose the extreme abuse the mentally ill residents of Kaufman House experienced. As my efforts to shape the story neared completion, my friend begged me to keep her name out of it. This was not my choice, but I respect her wishes.

In mid-May, I published on Amazon a book called *A Very Private Residence: Unlocking the Secrets of Kaufman House*.

Initially, I approached the Kaufman case with a desire to understand how the secret life within the houses could have evolved and continued unchecked for over 25 years. The first significant breach of secrecy occurred in November, 1999, when several individuals were observed working on a Butler County farm, in the nude. Officers dispatched to the scene immediately wondered, “Who are these people?” In the course of the trial, the people had an opportunity to speak for themselves. I found their stories quite absorbing, and I felt they deserved an audience. What was life like for the residents of Kaufman House?

The story that unfolds is a record of endless abuses of power. The mother of one resident quoted Arlan Kaufman as saying, “I’m a doctor and I don’t need to ask anybody’s opinion.” He took the liberty of billing Medicare for daily individual and group therapy sessions without medical records to substantiate the treatment. He controlled residents’ disability income and served as guardian and conservator for a resident with significant resources. He forced residents into seclusion, expecting them to be naked, sleep on dirty carpet, and make use of a bucket for elimination. He used a stun

gun or direct physical violence to manage resident behavior. He videotaped naked residents. He used nude residents as unpaid laborers on his farm. In his dual role of landlord and therapist, he verbally belittled residents, restricted their communication with family members, failed to maintain his property and keep appliances in working order. The list goes on.

Why would a highly-trained Mennonite social worker perpetrate such abuses? Why would his RN wife provide medical services to the residents and yet not question the living situation, the videotaping, the stun gun, the seclusion, the house-wide nudity? Why would loving parents accept these living conditions for their children? Why did treating psychiatrists ask no questions? Why did social service agencies not intervene? These are all difficult questions, and answers were only partially revealed as the trial progressed.

The biggest question, for all of us, is what we can do to decrease the likelihood that such abuses of power can flourish among us. I don't have the answer, but I think one way to begin is by paying attention to the victims' stories. People who are weak and vulnerable are not therefore less credible witnesses to the truth than people in positions of authority. In fact, they may be more honest, because they have less to conceal. We allow abuse to continue when we assume that individuals whose backgrounds we know and whose educational attainments we admire can do no wrong, and when we fail to respect the human dignity of "the least of these."

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