

SIDE LIGHTS

Doctor spent years studying landmark child abuse case

The story haunted him for years. **Stephen Lazoritz, MD**, a pediatrician and father of six, couldn't stop thinking about Mary Ellen Wilson, a Civil War orphan who was horribly abused by her adoptive parents while distressed neighbors and local police tried and failed to stop it. She was kept in a closet all day and made to sleep on a scrap of carpet on the floor. She was whipped daily, burned with an iron, and slashed with sewing scissors. Eventually, however, the girl was rescued and when her horrifying plight was made public, it led to the establishment of America's first child protection services.

As Medical Director of the Child Protection Center at Children's Hospital of Wisconsin, Dr. Lazoritz works in the field that Mary Ellen's life helped to create. And for more than 12 years, in his spare time, Dr. Lazoritz obsessively researched the story of Mary Ellen Wilson. His wife and children learned all the details along with him, hearing the story over and over. When a new daughter was born to Dr. Lazoritz and his wife Mary in 1983, they named her Mary Ellen in honor of the once-abused child.

In 1989 he published an epilogue – the triumphant story of what happened to Mary Ellen later in life. She lived to be 92 years old,



Steve Lazoritz with the book he spent years to compile and co-author.

married, and raised children of her own who were educated, successful, and compassionate. She was proof that intervention can work to save children and break the cycle of abuse, an inspiration to Dr. Lazoritz and others who work to help abused children.

In 1993, Dr. Lazoritz was contacted through the Internet by Eric Shelman, an author in California who was writing a book about the Mary Ellen Wilson case. Dr. Lazoritz became a co-author, with a renewed inspiration to learn everything he could about Mary Ellen: how she came to be placed in such an unfit home, and the unusual strategy that

finally succeeded in her rescue. The book, *Out of the Darkness*, was published recently and is available at the MCW Matthews Bookstore.

"I hope the message most people get from the book is a positive one," said Dr. Lazoritz. "She was rescued and became a positive person after being adopted by loving parents."

A fact that deeply impressed Dr. Lazoritz was that Mary Ellen's daughters Etta and Florence became highly-respected teachers. He actually met Florence while doing research for his book – she was teaching at the Florence Brasser School, named in her honor.

"How often is someone so well-regarded that a school is named for her while she is still living?" he noted. "I don't know of any other instances."

Dr. Lazoritz has been on the faculty of the Medical College since 1992 as Associate Professor of Pediatrics. His job entails giving medical opinions to police and others when child abuse is suspected. He also teaches medical students and physicians how to recognize and treat child abuse and neglect.

More information on his book can be found on the World Wide Web at www.dolphinmoon.com.