

The Trials of Gabriel Fernandez: A Reflection

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It is unconscionable when I consider what was done to Gabriel at the hands of any human, especially his mother, Pearl. As a clinician, I find it challenging to explain her behavior. A partial mental status exam in the court room would have concluded a flat affect, disheveled appearance, and eccentric makeup. Her apparent mood was sometimes irritable and her statement of apology seemed insincere. Neither Pearl nor Isauro, her boyfriend, at any point, showed signs of remorse such as tearfulness or distress. On the contrary, Isauro also appeared to have a mostly flat affect. Throughout the series, both seemed indifferent regarding Gabriel's death. However, they also demonstrated rage toward him. Moreover, Pearl demonstrated hypersexuality and Isauro seemed to be hypermasculine. I am not certain whether I agree that Pearl could be diagnosed with a severe intellectual disability as she was highly aware of legal consequences. She also attempted to cover her involvement in the torture and abuse of her son. It is more probable that she has a Cluster B Personality Disorder (PD) as does Isauro (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). However, a PD cannot fully explain nor excuse the behavior of Pearl or Isauro.

Homophobia is another possible explanation for why Isauro engaged in the torture and murder of Gabriel. Both Pearl and Isauro acknowledged that they believed Gabriel was gay and that it made them angry. Additionally, as previously indicated, Isauro behaved in a hypermasculine manner and this was reinforced by Pearl's seductive coercion. However, neither misogyny nor perverse sexuality fully account for the actions of Gabriel's mother and her boyfriend. Therefore, it is challenging to conclude that their behavior can be explained by mental illness. I am inclined to conclude that Pearl and Isauro are not only mentally ill, but they are also evil.

However, each person in Gabriel's life before and during the eight months in which he lived at his mother's home failed him. His grandparents, uncle, great-aunt, great-uncle, and numerous other relatives failed him in that they knew Pearl's character. Additionally, they knew she had never wanted Gabriel to be born. However, they all allowed him to live with her. They also knew Gabriel was happier and safer with his grandparents, uncles, or aunts. His relatives witnessed the evidence of physical abuse and heard Gabriel say he was afraid of his mother's boyfriend. Yet, they did not remove him from her home or contact the local Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) until the abuse became deadly.

In addition, his teacher and principal failed to save Gabriel. They allowed him to return to a home each day that was clearly a danger to him as evidenced by his physical wounds and the specific questions he asked regarding punishment. Furthermore, they refused to take photographs or have a medical professional examine Gabriel. The team of social workers and DCFS similarly failed Gabriel in that they did not thoroughly examine the home. Moreover, they did not follow the protocol to have him examined by a medical professional. Gabriel was not even questioned by the social workers. Instead, the social workers listened to his mother. In addition, there is evidence that they falsified records and did not complete necessary documents for reports of child abuse. The welfare office also failed Gabriel as they did not officially report the clear evidence of abuse as described by the security guard. Finally, the sheriff's department failed Gabriel as they trusted his mother's word and also neither examined the home nor Gabriel for signs of abuse.

If I were Gabriel's therapist, I would report the signs of abuse to the Child Abuse Hotline and would continually follow-up on the report. I would advocate for Gabriel's trusted relatives to take him to a medical professional to have him examined and would also take photographs of

Gabriel's injuries. I may possibly call paramedics to ensure that Gabriel was examined. To further advocate for Gabriel's safety, I would advise that he be temporarily relocated to another relative's home pending the abuse investigation. As Gabriel was exposed to significant trauma and severe abuse, I would treat him from a trauma-informed orientation. However, I would work to ensure his physical safety and return to stability before addressing long-term effects of trauma.

At the conclusion of the series, I was outraged to learn that the social workers appeal had been granted and their charges overturned (Knappenberger, 2020). Their negligence, incompetence, lack of empathy, and remorse were incomprehensible. Although I recognize that they had severe and heavy caseloads, it is unfathomable that they did not take responsibility for what happened to Gabriel. Overall, the conclusion of the Trials of Gabriel Fernandez left me fraught. However, I also felt hopeful that through the actions of people such as the security guard at the welfare office, the prosecuting attorney, and compassionate helping professionals, cases such as this will be diminished or even eliminated.

References

American Psychiatric Association (2013). *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th Ed.

Knappenberger, B. (Director/Producer). (2020). *The Trials of Gabriel Fernandez*. Retrieved from <https://www.netflix.com>