

Seven U.S. soldiers die in bombings in Iraq. 12A

Federer may be the only sure bet at Wimbledon. 1C

St. Petersburg Times

Failures persist in child welfare

The system was transformed a decade ago, but not necessarily fixed.

BY MELANIE AVE
Times Staff Writer

It was supposed to be a new era.

Florida began handing over its child welfare duties to private agencies a decade ago, vowing children would be safer.

The new system would end child abuse disasters that plagued the government-run system for years, including the disappearance of 5-year-old Rilya Wilson of Miami and the death of 6-year-old Kayla McKean in Central Florida.

But when a missing 2-year-old Florida foster child was found June 14 at a Wisconsin house of horrors — where a woman was buried in the back yard and a scalded 11-year-old boy hid in a closet — glaring fault lines were exposed in the state's privatized child welfare system.

As numerous mistakes are revealed, the case of Courtney Alisa Clark is proving to be yet another systemic failure, a troubling example of the very problem that reform was supposed to fix.

Courtney is safe now. But what about the 585 other children missing from Florida's foster care system, and the 47,000 under the state's supervision? Tough questions are being raised anew about the state's ability to protect its most vulnerable charges.

"I think there are serious flaws, whether it's public or private," said state Sen. Ronda Storms, R-Brandon, who chairs the Senate Committee on Children, Family Services and Youth.

See CHILD, 7A

Shirley Gordon wanted it all and knew how to get it. Her gifts for theft and deception brought her a fortune and a legitimate claim to the title

THE CON QUEEN

A St. Petersburg Times special report



BY CHRIS TISCH | Times Staff Writer

On Jan. 31, 1969, a stunning young woman tried to steal a \$28 red and white dress from a Tampa department store. Shirley Gordon was caught and arrested. It was her 18th birthday. That theft launched a remarkable criminal career. Over nearly four decades, Gordon became the grande dame of local cons, jackals and thieves. Through identity theft and fraud, she stole more than \$1-million. Her crimes funded a lavish lifestyle. She drove Jaguars and BMWs.

MORE INSIDE

- A time line of Gordon's 38 years of run-ins with the law.
- A cast of characters.
- A by-the-numbers look at Gordon's life.

14, 16-17A

She stuffed her homes with gaudy furniture and wall-sized televisions. She wore gold jewelry and silk clothes.

Gordon was convicted of almost 40 felonies. But her crimes never stopped. She ran scams out of prison cells and once conned her way out of jail.

In 2005, a prosecutor named Beverly Andringa decided to try to send Gordon away for 30 years.

But Gordon had acquired a benefactor.

Gordon's chiropractor — a young woman with a successful clinic and a waterfront home — hired a team of powerhouse lawyers and paid more than \$30,000 to bail Gordon out of jail.

Dr. Rhonda Schroeder also bought Gordon a \$450,000 house and more than \$150,000 in furniture. She even planned to take the stand during Gordon's trial and provide her a false alibi.

Andringa was baffled. Why would a successful person like Schroeder have anything to do with a career con like Gordon?

Andringa would learn it was a scam more devilish than she ever had seen, the coup de grace of the grande dame's career.

See CON, 14A



A LIFE IN PICTURES

Shirley Gordon's 18th birthday, Jan. 31, 1969, marked her first arrest, the first of 45. These are just some of her jail mug shots, going back to 1980, the earliest available.

School funds: Fool me once ...

Backers of the state property tax plan say schools won't lose. Sound familiar?

BY LETITIA STEIN
Times Staff Writer

To homeowners eager for property tax relief, but nervous about cutting money for public schools, Florida's elected leaders are saying: Trust us.

That could be a tough sell in a state where a lot of people still remember what happened with the Florida Lottery.

Two decades ago, voters approved the lottery after being promised that its profits would enhance education spending. Then people learned lawmakers were using lottery money to replace education funding, not adding to it.

The outrage — still reverberating today — undermined legislative credibility. And it will likely factor into the debate over the "super homestead" constitutional amendment that could cut as much as \$7-billion from school funding over four years.

The Republican architects of the property tax plan are vowing to hold schools harmless but haven't said how they will replace the money stripped from tax rolls. Many Democrats aren't buying their pledge, saying this could be the largest education cut in state history.

The interest groups that rally for public schools aren't sure what to believe.

"There's just a lot of 'what-ifs,'" says Dawn Steward, legislative chair of the Florida PTA, which has not taken a position. "We're talking about the future of our children's education."

Republican leaders say their track record is strong: This year, when the state had less money to spend, they made sure education received the largest increases.

"The Legislature, by some, has been tried and sentenced already," says Rep. Ray Sansom, R-Destin, the next House speaker. "That's very unfair."

...

Sansom remembers all too well the cynicism generated by the lottery bait and switch. He was a legislative aide at the time.

See TRUST, 9A

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SECOND A SECTION

Veils test tolerance

As more Muslim women in Britain opt to wear a full veil, the secular country moves toward legal curbs. 19A

IN MONEY

Still hot real estate

Unlike the housing market, commercial construction is thriving. Here's the latest on the top five Tampa Bay area projects. 1D

TODAY'S WEATHER

Mostly dry
8 a.m. 77° Noon 89° 4 p.m. 93° 8 p.m. 85°
10% rain chance. More, 2A

Abby	7E	Lottery	2A
Arts	2L	Letters	2P
Books	10-11L	Movies	2E
Classified	F	NIE Hot Spot	
Crossword		In Classified	
7E, 6P, classified		Travel	4L

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Think you're seeing the same bird over and over?

Human influence is producing uniformity, what a birder calls "the Wal-Martization of the American skies."

BY DAN DEWITT
Times Staff Writer

NEW PORT RICHEY — Ken Tracey tallied the plump, off-white birds perched on utility lines as he drove through a neighborhood in southwestern Pasco County.

"Collared-dove," said Tracey, president of the West Pasco Audubon Society. "Mourning dove with a collared-dove right above it ... collared-dove ... another collared-dove."

So he saw plenty of birds, but mostly the same kind of bird, the Eurasian collared-dove. A native of Eastern Europe, it established a beachhead near New Port

Winners and losers

Get a closer look at some of the bird species that have thrived in the United States over the past 40 years and those that have suffered. 9A

Richey 20 years ago, advanced across the continent and became one of the most common nonmigratory species in Florida.

Along with a handful of other species — including American crows and Canada geese — it has thrived because it can live comfortably among humans and feed on their handouts, according to a recent study by the National Audubon Society.

See BIRDS, 9A



LANCE ARAM ROTHSTEIN | Times

Ken Tracey leads a "sounds at sunset" field trip in Port Richey recently. Birders note that development has been a boon for some species, a disaster for others.