

KMGH-TV, Denver

## 'FAILING THE CHILDREN: DEADLY MISTAKES'

By **Allison J. Waldman**  
*Special to TelevisionWeek*

While big-name network shows usually grab all the headlines for winning Peabody Awards, the awards board also recognizes excellence on the local news level. This year, Denver's KMGH-TV won its second Peabody in five years for the story of Chandler Grafner, a 7-year-old boy who died of starvation because of systemic incompetence in Denver's Department of Human Services.

It was the TV station's persistent investigation into Chandler's plight that led to a statewide story and eventually uncovered 13 similar deaths nationwide.

John Ferrugia was the lead investigative reporter. "Initially, it was a story about a 7-year-old who was found starved to death in a closet. This was in Denver, but it is happening in many cities. In our initial interview with his grandmother, she told us that Denver's Department of Human Services had been involved, and we followed up to find out what their involvement was. All the records were protected, so it became a very difficult situation to figure out," he said.

As the probe continued, Mr. Ferrugia, working with producers Tom Burke, Arthur Kane and photojournalist/editor Jason Foster, discovered gross incompetence in the management of Denver's Department of Human Services.

"This kid had been coming to school without a coat in freezing weather, and the school was calling. Then he showed up with a huge bruise and he told his teachers that his father had hit him," said Mr. Ferrugia. "The police were called and he told the police what had happened, but then the story changed to he fell in the bathtub. Essentially, Human Services dropped the ball. They didn't believe him."

When Chandler stopped showing up at school, Human Services claimed he was being home-schooled. However, KMGH learned after the fact that management at Human Services had been lying.

"Three weeks later, he's dead. We found a pattern of incompetence in the Denver Department of Human Services. They didn't follow up. That led to other deaths that we uncovered. One supervisor had signed off on three of these cases where death had occurred," Mr.



**TRAGEDY** John Ferrugia investigated a child's death for Denver's KMGH-TV.

Ferrugia said.

Winning the Peabody is an affirmation for Mr. Ferrugia and his colleagues, but not a reason to stop working the story. "For us, the Peabody says that we haven't let these kids down, that we're on the right track in terms of what we're doing and the focus that we have for the community," he said. ■

## PEABODYS

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in which the news department went into Johns Hopkins' operating rooms to reveal the human drama of real-life medical crises, while CNN's coverage of 2008 presidential primary campaigns and debates was recognized for its use of state-of-the-art technology as well as the small army of reporters, producers and analysts it employed.

PBS' Gwen Ifill won a Peabody for her work on "Washington Week," the D.C.-based political talk show that supplemented its contribution to the national discourse in 2008 with a series of live events held outside the Beltway. NBC war correspondent Richard Engel was recognized for "Tip of the Spear," his reportage from the war in Afghanistan.

From the sports angle, the Peabody judges were impressed with NBC's larger-than-life coverage of the 2008 Beijing Olympics' Opening Cer-

emony. ESPN Films was honored for its documentary "Black Magic," a look at the lives of African American basketball players and their coaches at historically black colleges and universities during the civil rights era.

For the second time in 34 years, NBC's popular "Saturday Night Live" earned a Peabody, this time for its 2008 political satire. AMC followed up last year's Peabody Award for "Mad Men" by winning one for its drama series "Breaking Bad." ABC also snared an award for its mystical drama "Lost."

The Peabody Awards also recognized alternate media in 2009, including YouTube.com and the New York Times Web site, NYTimes.com, while at the same time singling out the innovation behind the "Metropolitan Opera: Live in HD" series, which was broadcast live via satellite to movie theaters around the world.

These winners and others will be presented with their awards tonight at the Waldorf-Astoria hotel in New York. ■

KLAS-TV, Las Vegas

## 'CROSSFIRE: WATER, POWER AND POLITICS'

By **Hillary Atkin**  
*Special to TelevisionWeek*

For George Knapp, water is anything but a dry subject. The chief investigative reporter for KLAS-TV in Las Vegas has been covering the complex issues involving water supply for a rapidly growing metropolis for the past 10 years.

But with powerful forces at work—including the casino industry, developers and the Southern Nevada Water Authority—in what Mr. Knapp called a "water grab," the amount of time in the newscast just wasn't enough. So the CBS affiliate put on a one-hour special, "Crossfire: Water, Power and Politics," to dissect a costly new plan and, with it, issues that affect nearly everyone in the desert state.

The program, which has been regularly updated and has aired five times, is taking home a Peabody Award for what the board called "a brave, meticulous examination of a plan to pipe massive amounts of water from rural Nevada to booming Sin City and the potential consequences for ranchers, farmers, Native Americans and the environment."

The in-depth examination

looked at a proposal that would siphon billions of gallons of water to Las Vegas from environmentally sensitive but politically weak rural Nevada counties, as well as at concurrent plans to build three massive coal-fired power plants in the same areas.

Voices on all sides of the controversial issues were heard—elected officials in Las Vegas, the rural residents, environmentalists, scientists, ranchers, business owners, energy executives, water experts and Native Americans. Their views were put into perspective by KLAS political analyst Jon Ralston.

Just a few weeks ago, the Nevada state engineer put the 250- to 300-mile-long water pipeline plan on hold for at least two years.

"We'd like to think we had a small part in asking questions," said Mr. Knapp, who is also the senior producer of the station's six-member investigative unit, one of the largest in the nation. "Since it aired, it has emboldened opponents, and environmental groups have jumped in, making noise, and



**GETTING SOAKED?** KLAS' series focused on water supply issues in Las Vegas.

filed lawsuits based on the effects on endangered species. Now that the administration has changed, the Endangered Species Act is being enforced.

"It's huge money, and huge stakes to determine what kind of growth Las Vegas is going to have. Our roads are clogged, the air is dirty and there are water shortages, but there are other solutions, starting with enforcing conservation efforts, which isn't being done," he said. ■

WVL-TV, New Orleans

## NOAH HOUSING PROGRAM INVESTIGATION

By **Hillary Atkin**  
*Special to TelevisionWeek*

Anyone who thinks investigative reporting on the local station level is dead need look no further than WVL-TV in New Orleans, which aired more than 50 reports in one month about fraud in a public agency tasked with assisting poor and elderly residents after Hurricane Katrina.

Peabody-winning anchor-reporter Lee Zurik launched a probe instigated by a tip from a community activist. It revealed that a multimillion-dollar program run by the nonprofit New Orleans Affordable Homeownership program, or NOAH, may have been a scheme to funnel money to unscrupulous contractors connected to the one-time head of the agency.

NOAH gave \$2 million in federal and local government funds to contractors to demolish homes that were damaged by the hurricane, the first step in rehabilitating and rebuilding the houses. An investigation revealed many properties where work was never performed, or other irregularities that reeked of corruption.

The station's stories were a lightning rod in the community from the start. After the first report, New

Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin accused the CBS affiliate of hurting the hurricane recovery efforts and ordered Mr. Zurik to stop looking into the issue.

"We looked at a new list that raised even more questions," said Mr. Zurik. "Some of the work that city-hired contractors claimed they had done had not been done. Some of the homes didn't exist. Contractors billed for work that wasn't done. As we dug in deeper, we realized many contractors had ties to the head of the agency, her past business partners and the mayor's brother-in-law."

Within a week of the first report on July 21, 2008, the FBI, the U.S. Department of Housing & Urban Development and the New Orleans Inspector General launched their own investigations. A federal grand jury is now looking into the situation.

Ten days after Mayor Nagin's news conference, NOAH voted to suspend its operations. Five days after that, all of its employees were fired. The head of the agency had quit her job a month before the first WWL report.

"We're still looking into it," said Mr. Zurik, who got a huge viewer response to his reports, each of which ran five to seven minutes long. ■



**SCAM?** Lee Zurik, left, looked into the New Orleans Affordable Homeownership program for WWL-TV.