

OPINION

The LEDGER INDEPENDENT

Founded 1968 | A Champion Media LLC Newspaper
120 Limestone St., Maysville, KY 41056 // (606) 564-9091
maysville-online.com/news/opinion

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How did Dolly touch your life?

If you're like me, the larger-than-life Dolly Parton has intersected numerous phases of your story.

My awareness of Dolly goes back nearly 60 years. Nashville's WSM-TV (now WSMV-TV) carried "The Porter Wagoner Show" (on which Dolly performed from 1967-1974) as part of its Saturday afternoon lineup of syndicated country music shows.

(I was born a wee bit too late and too far to the west to see Dolly's debut at age 10 on grocer Cas Walker's Knoxville-area "Farm and Home Hour," but I did shop at a Cas Walker store in the late 70s.)

Admittedly, my prepubescent self looked forward to the comedy of the late, great Speck Rhodes as much as the pulchritude of Dolly; but her solos and duets were welcome nonetheless.

Later, on a junior high school field trip to WSMV, I got to see a prominent poster of Porter and Dolly advertising Breeze laundry detergent (which famously packed exclusive "flowery towels" or washcloths in each box).

During college, I went from hitting the books to slapping my knee as I watched the movie "9 to 5," in which Dolly, Jane Fonda and Lily Tomlin terrorized horrible boss Dabney Coleman. (Still hard to resist getting pumped up by that theme song.)

The year my wife and I started dating, ABC launched a high-octane variety show starring Dolly. Initial ratings were spectacular, but an alarming decline soon began. As the Grok chatbot explains, "Hollywood producers and writers pushed a glossy, high-concept production that often felt forced." Eventually, viewers received episodes that were more intimate, more authentic, more geared to Dolly's down-home personality; but it was too little, too late.

I have written before about my family's (multiple) trips to Dollywood. Barbara Mandrell sang "I Was Country

When Country Wasn't Cool," but I was at Dollywood when Dollywood wasn't Dollywood. In 1967, my parents took me and my brother (and our mother's boss) on a memorable visit to Rebel Railroad, which became Goldrush Junction, which became Silver Dollar City Tennessee, which became the "Smoky Mountain fairyland" Dollywood. I am indebted to Dolly for helping more families enjoy a super-sized version of my childhood.

Of course my son Gideon was an eager recipient of the free books mailed out by Dolly's Imagination Library. True, the Tyree family already possessed bookshelves creaking with graphic novels, textbooks and my wife's childhood storybook collection; but I am in awe of the benefit to homes where books were scarce (whether because of poverty or reading-averse parents).

I haven't finished listening to it, but Dolly's 2024 album "Smoky Mountain DNA: Family, Faith and Fables" (with performances by five generations of her father's and mother's relatives) is raw and real and a testament to not "gettin' above your raisin'."

Especially considering the news of Dolly's passing, I'm sorry I wasn't present in June when she cut the ribbon for the grand opening of Dolly's Tennessean Travel Stop, just down the road from where my mother and Gideon both graduated from high school.

President Trump called for flags to fly at half-staff in honor of Dolly – a rare honor for a "mere" entertainer/entrepreneur/philanthropist.

To Dolly's credit, such honors for celebrities might be more common – if not for their focus on hedonism or divisive political grandstanding.

I'd love to hear your own memories of Dolly.

And remember: "If you see someone without a smile today, give 'em yours."



DANNY TYREE



Stay with the child: Kentucky must rethink how it serves vulnerable children.

Norma Hatfield
Kentucky Lantern

Stay with the child. It sounds simple, but it may be the most important principle Kentucky can bring to serving vulnerable children and families.

At the August 19, 2026, Interim Joint Committee (IJC) on Families and Children meeting, Senator Danny Carroll, R-Paducah, shared that he has filed a bill request to establish a working group to study how Kentucky's children and family services are structured, including whether some services should be better aligned, consolidated or possibly separated from the larger Cabinet for Health and Family Services (CHFS).

The committee heard a presentation of how Ohio reorganized services under its Department of Children and Youth. I found it compelling that their restructuring also focused on the quality of service to children and families. I hope both legislative chambers will support Kentucky taking a serious look at our own systems.

Two years ago, I advocated for HCR 117, which would have created a kinship care task force. It didn't pass. But perhaps this broader study offers something more meaningful: a holistic look at how programs work together for children removed from unsafe homes.

And while we study the larger picture, let's keep working on the problems in front of us. SB 151 is one exam-

ple. Much of the 2024 kinship law addresses the initial placement of children with relatives or fictive kin caregivers. So, in considering the July 2026 policy implementation, are we accomplishing all that was intended from the beginning? From my perspective as a caregiver and advocate — not yet.

In fact, I've submitted two rounds of comments and asked the IJC on Families and Children for a public review and discussion — not to prolong the process or be a pest, but to ensure the policy works as intended. Initial child placement matters to the larger system and to the child.

Kinship caregivers don't get advance preparation to take in children. The challenge is making it possible for that person to say yes — short term and long term.

As for traditional foster homes, let's not forget the fact we have a shortage. Let's ask what would encourage more families to foster and help retain the homes we have. We need to stay focused on this issue.

Most importantly, as we ask people to step up and take in these children, we can't forget that other families hear how the system is working. If caregivers aren't supported well, others may be less inclined to step up, too.

Financial decisions should be examined through the same lens. When Kentucky reduces assistance such as KTAP, do we really grasp what that means

for families raising children or their ability to continue providing care? A dollar saved in one program isn't necessarily a dollar saved

for Kentucky if it creates a bigger problem somewhere else. Forty-two percent of kinship caregivers rely on KTAP.

Also, Kentucky has spent years discussing children with high-acuity needs across our systems. Some children in CHFS custody have slept in office buildings because appropriate treatment placements weren't available.

In juvenile justice, Senator Carroll has repeatedly tried to address high-acuity needs with SB 242 in 2024 and SB 111 in 2025 and SB 125 in 2026. All three passed the Senate but not the House. If he comes back again, who in the House will help push it across the finish line? We need to stay with these children too.

If a 2023 CHFS Request for Proposal didn't result in a workable solution for these challenging child placements, let's revisit the approach and determine what else might work. The children's needs remain.

Some solutions will cost money. Good stewardship means maximizing federal dollars, examining other appropriate funding sources and using community partnerships where they make sense. But sometimes, after doing all of that, we have to write the check.

That's why I hope Kentucky takes this

broader study seriously — and doesn't make it an exercise in rearranging government. We need to carefully review how children are initially placed and what happens from kinship care, foster care and treatment through permanency or adulthood. Let's examine services inside and outside of government. Let's look at the service criteria, funding, funding sources and how one program affects another.

In doing all this, there should be administrators and legislators at the table alongside front-line workers, providers, funding experts, foster parents and kinship caregivers. Bring the real voices, not just the figureheads. The goal is solving problems.

In the interim, don't wait for restructuring. Keep working on SB 151. Keep addressing the foster-home shortage and high-acuity placements. Examine financial supports and services like KTAP. Measure success by what happens to the people we're trying to serve — not by simply checking a box.

Children don't experience organizational charts, funding streams or program names. They experience whether they have somewhere safe to go, whether the person caring for them has the resources they need and whether the right help arrives when they need it.

And whatever Kentucky ultimately modifies or builds, we have to stay with the child.

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