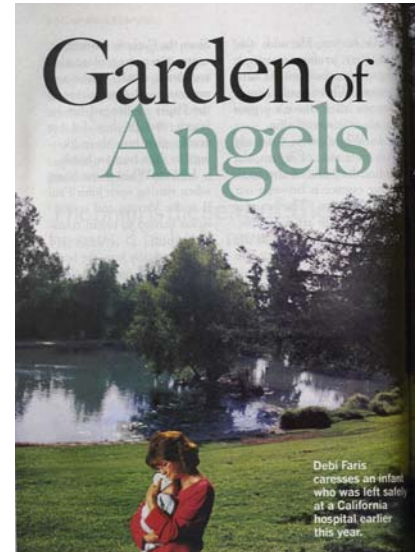


After laying dozens of tiny souls to rest, a California woman takes up the fight to save young lives....

Gail Wescott. November 2002



She has conducted the most solemn of rituals again and again, in the antiseptic crypts of the Los Angeles County coroner's office. After removing the plastic wrap, Debi Faris washes and rocks each baby. "You can always see a face, and I never forget it" she says. "I rub their little hands and toes and say a prayer that people will be touched by this child. I take my time. Then I wrap the baby in a handmade receiving blanket, place it in a casket with toys and poems, and carry it to the car for the ride back. I need to be alone for the drive. I need the silence".

Faris, 47, drives to the Garden of Angels, a small cemetery on a wind-swept hill 70 miles east of Los Angeles. Six years ago, Faris founded the Garden which has become the final resting place for 54 babies to date, all of them abandoned in Dumpsters or trash bins, tossed along highways or washed up[on beaches. "I know every one of these children's stories," Faris says. "I have become their voice. Even if they were just here for a moment, I believe they were here for a purpose – and that purpose is to make sure we stop having burials in the Garden of Angels."

Her mission has transformed Faris from a shy, suburban soccer mom into a lobbyist and lecturer on the national circuit. She drives California's freeways in a silver Volvo wagon with a rear window banner that reads: Don't Throw Your Baby Away! In the United State, upward of 100 babies are discarded – literally thrown away – every year. Some states allow a woman to leave her unwanted but unharmed newborn in a designated safe place without fear of prosecution for child abandonment or loss of privacy. But when Faris started her work, California wasn't one of them.

Faris's journey began one evening in May 1996 as she stood at the kitchen sink in her two-story Yucaipa, Calif., home, cutting potatoes for the dinner she was preparing for her family; then teenage sons Brandon and Ryan and daughter Jessica, ten . She was half listening to the television when a news story caught her attention. A newborn boy had been found in a duffel bag along the San Pedro Freeway.

"Tossed out the window like trash!" she exclaims, still amazed. "It just stopped me. Who knew this baby? Who would bury it? What was the mother thinking?"

The following evening Faris sat with her family and proposed they do something loving for the baby – that they give him a name and a proper burial. Jessica asked in amazement, “Somebody threw their baby *away*?”

“It touched them in the same way that it touched me,” Faris says.

With no clue how to proceed, Faris picked up the phone the next day and dialed the Los Angeles Police Department. “We had never received a call like that – ever,” recalls Detective Peggy Leberknight, whose first thought was that the caller was involved in the homicide. She referred Faris to the L.A. coroner’s office, where husband and wife investigators Doyle and Gilda Tolbert were equally skeptical. “We don’t get a lot of calls about dumped babies,” says Gilda.

“Look,” Faris pleaded, “I know you think I’m nutty, but I’m just a lady from Yucaipa whose family has been touched by this child, and we would like to take care of him.” The Tolberts launched background checks on Faris, which revealed nothing untoward. And Faris’s resolve to help grew even stronger when she learned that if no one came forward to claim him following a 30-day investigation, the baby from the San Pedro Freeway would be cremated, stored in a box for three years with other John and Jane Does – “including murderers and rug dealers,” she says – and then dumped into a communal grave.

When the Tolberts gave their approval, Faris began searching for a cemetery. Never having made funeral arrangements, she closed her eyes and pointed at the listing in the yellow pages. She found her way to Desert Lawn, a green oasis surrounded by parched brown hills in nearby Calimesa, and began making burial plans for the boy she intended to name Matthew.

Then, three weeks later, Faris learned from the coroner’s office that another infant boy had been found strangled to death, in a Dumpster. “So we made plans to bury two babies,” she says. But when Gilda Tolbert called again with word that an unidentified two-year-old girl had washed up on a Malibu beach, Faris said she would have to call back. “I had asked about one child, and now there were three,” she remembers. “I asked myself if I had the strength to do this. I sat at my kitchen table and cried – then picked up the phone and said we would be coming with three caskets.”

The first service at the Garden of Angels was held August 26, 1996, for Matthew, Nathan and Dora. Faris’s father, who lives in Oregon, cut wooden crosses for the graves and Chris Wohlwend, then the music pastor at Faris’s Yucaipa Christian Church, led the prayers. “We wanted to surround the babies with a circle of love,” says Faris. At the end, three doves were released to fly heavenward.

Debi Faris wrote a check for the burials and signed an agreement to purchase 42 additional plots for \$27,000 in the walled-off area near the cemetery’s administrative office. If there were three children already, Faris reasoned that there would be more. The \$291 monthly payment was not undertaken lightly. “My oldest child was starting college, and my car kept breaking down,” she says. “But there needed to be a place where these children could rest together.”

As it turned out, donors subsequently came forward with enough to cover the purchase price for the plots. ‘It was all small donations,’ says Faris, who recounts how, after area newspaper published stories about the Garden, locals began visiting the graves and leaving money behind. Two little girls left a bag of coins amounting to \$5, along with poems, toys and ceramic angels. Soon entire communities got involved. Senior citizens held a fund-raiser at a local mall. Rick’s Barber Shop donated a morning’s receipts. High school students volunteered to help with graveside plantings. And the dove lady donated her services permanently. The Garden of Angels had struck some primal chord.



Each time a baby was found Faris drove alone to the coroner’s office to pick it up. Doyle Tolbert, a former Green Beret who served in Vietnam and who is still rattled by the sight of a baby in the trash, was amazed. ‘Sometimes I think it’s God showing an old cynic like me that there are angels,’ he says. ‘Debi is these babies’ guardian angel.’

Meanwhile, Faris yearned to understand how a desperate young woman might feel her only option in a Dumpster. One mother, she learned, was a college honor student from a loving family, away from home for the first time. She gave birth in her dorm room, wrapped the baby in a T-shirt and put it down the trash chute. Faris attended the young woman’s court hearings and now visits her in prison, where she is serving five years. ‘I just wish she had been able to tell someone,’ says Faris.

But it was another case that turned Faris into an activist. The day after the burial of baby Jordan at the Garden of Angels, a young El Monte, Calif., woman dropped her healthy newborn at an emergency room entrance and disappeared. ‘People were outraged that a mother could abandon her baby like that,’ recalls Faris, ‘and I was outraged they didn’t see that she had cared enough to leave her child in a safe place.’ Faris called a local TF news reporter and asked why police were pursuing the El Monte woman, who had done the right thing. ‘I’m sorry Mrs. Faris,’ the reporter responded. ‘That’s the law.’

Well, replied Faris, it’s time that the law gets changed. She learned that Texas had already passed a safe-haven law, and other states were introducing such bills. She was determined to see California adopt similar legislation. It was not an easy process.

After her state assemblyman turned Faris away, state senator Jim Brulte finally agreed to introduce such a bill in January 2000. On four separate occasions, Faris traveled to Sacramento to testify on behalf of the bill. Nine months later – Faris smiles at the coincidence in the elapsed time – the bill passed. It became law on January 1, 2001.

In March of that year, Faris was devastated when baby Jacob was found next to a Dumpster. ‘That was so exceptionally difficult,’ she says, ‘because now we had this law. I wanted to stand on the rooftops and shout that this didn’t need to happen.’ Faris realized that many of the women who needed to know about California’s Safe Haven law – most age 25 or younger – didn’t have a clue that it existed.

A few weeks after Jacob was found, a foster-care mother walked into the Garden of Angels’ time office, swaddling a baby with, say Faris, ‘dark curly hair and the blackest

eyes you ever saw.” His bother had given birth in a hotel room and was thinking of putting him a trash bin when she remembered hearing somewhere that she could leave the baby at a hospital and not get in trouble. She called 911. “This is that baby,” the foster mother told Faris. “I felt you needed to know that this law works.” She handed the infant to Faris.

“It was like the world stopped,” Faris says, “like nothing else existed except him and me.” The baby, it turned out, had been safely surrendered on March 31, the same day Faris buried Jacob. A couple plans to adopt the child, who’s been named Jacob by his foster parents.

Faris only wishes there were more positive endings. In the 20 months following the enactment of California’s Safe Have law, 12 babies have been safely surrendered 29 others have been abandoned, and 17 of them were found dead. While two babies were safely surrendered within a week of each other this past July, five newborns were abandoned in Los Angeles County, three of them dead, in June. “It’s clear that word about the new law is not reaching all the people who need to hear it,” says Doyle Tolbert.

That is why, Faris says, “I’ll go anywhere to talk to anyone who will listen.” She now devotes her time to speaking to high school and college students – to any group that invites her – telling of the new law.

On a recent spring morning, a noisy gaggle of ninth graders jams a classroom in Yucaipa. Within minutes, the room goes silent, the students riveted by the woman standing before them. She is talking about birth, life and death – and choices youngsters can make to define them.

“Secrets kill,” she says. “I know, because I’ve buried 54 of them. And I’ve learned that one person can make a difference.” Faris continues, “If you tell just one person about this new law, you will have done something important. There are things in life worth standing up for.”

