

Life blamed for former child stars' problems

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Dana Plato and her fellow "Diff'rent Strokes" child stars Gary Coleman and Todd Bridges enjoyed a heady TV fame that ended more than a decade ago.

It seems they've been paying for it ever since.

Plato, 34, died Saturday of an accidental drug overdose, one day after telling Howard Stern's radio show she was clean and sober. Bridges also has fought to overcome drug and legal problems; Coleman has been beset by legal and financial woes.

But to blame their Hollywood experience is wrong, Betty Bridges, Todd's mother, said Monday.

"The media portrays it as the kids on the show being

cursed. It had nothing to do with that.

The show was a very positive experience," Bridges said.

The drug problems faced by her son and Plato stemmed from their difficult home lives, not the pressures of early fame, she said. Bridges suffered when she and his father, now dead, got divorced.

Plato had to cope with her mother's serious illness, Bridges said.

"My son has said to me, 'I would have these problems whether I was in the business or out of it,'" she said, adding: "How many kids who are not in show business have a drug problem?"

Her son is "really destroyed" by Plato's death,

Bridges said. "But he's looking at this as a wake-up call for everybody. Not just for people in show business, but for everybody."

Todd Bridges, 34, was unavailable for an interview because he has an exclusive agreement with the TV show "Inside Edition."

Now married and with an infant son, he is working as a film director-producer and speaking out against drugs, his mother said.

Danny Bonaduce, 39, "The Partridge Family" star who overcame his own drug and career problems and re-emerged as a radio disc jockey, concurred that Hollywood is not to blame for a child star's downfall.

"Not to diminish the tragedy of Dana Plato's death,

but the only difference is you know her name. People O.D. every day. There are a thousand reasons," Bonaduce said.

One observer disagreed. Dr. Carole Lieberman, a psychiatrist and longtime industry consultant, said the perils of early, short-lived Hollywood success can't be denied.

"When child stars are no longer getting attention as stars, they are so addicted to the spotlight that they find themselves acting out in negative ways to get attention," Lieberman said.

For the cast of "Diff'rent Strokes," the glory ride lasted from 1978 to 1986, when the show was a hit for NBC. Coleman, now 31, and Bridges played two brothers

from Harlem who went to live with their mother's wealthy employer (Conrad Bain) after she died.

Plato played Bain's teenage daughter, Kimberly.

On Saturday, while visiting the Oklahoma home of her fiancé's parents, the actress died after apparently taking the painkiller Loritab along with Valium.

Police said the death appeared to be an accidental overdose.

She also had run-ins with the law. In 1991, she was arrested for robbing a Las Vegas video store and was placed on five years' probation. In 1992 she was given another five years' probation for forging prescriptions for Valium.

Coleman, whose growth

was stunted by a congenital kidney disorder, fought a bitter legal battle with his parents over whether he was mentally fit to handle his own affairs.

In February, Coleman pleaded no contest to disturbing the peace after he punched an autograph-seeker he claimed insulted him. Coleman testified he had worked as a security guard after having trouble finding work in Hollywood.

Bridges was involved in a long series of arrests ranging from carrying a concealed weapon to attempted murder. In the latter case, he was acquitted on attempted murder and assault charges in connection with the 1989 shooting of a crack dealer.

ACLU inundated with complaints on overzealous school officials

CLEVELAND (AP) — Eleven students are suspended for putting a satirical essay on their personal Web site.

A teen-ager is sent to the police station for wearing black clothing. A student is interrogated about the chemistry book he's carrying.

Across the nation, American Civil Liberties Union offices say they're being swamped by complaints that nervous school officials are trampling students' constitutional rights since the April 20 shootings in Littleton, Colo.

"It seems to have become a witch hunt. I'm sure we've gotten hundreds of phone calls," said Ann Beeson, a staff attorney at the ACLU's national headquarters in New York. "Most school officials are not aware or not focusing on the fact that students are

citizens, too."

Gary Daniels of the ACLU in Ohio said the most serious of more than two dozen complaints to his office involved 11 students from Brimfield, a small town about 30 miles southeast of Cleveland. The students had a Web site for the Gothic subculture of youths who wear black, listen to rocker Marilyn Manson and think a lot about death.

The two Colorado gunmen embraced some Goth trappings but also exhibited racist attitudes and violence that most in the Goth world reject.

The Web site, filled with images of dragons and castles and dark poetry, had been created months before the Littleton shootings but was updated with comment on the massacre.

The students called

gunmen Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold fellow "freaks" and sarcastically praised them.

One statement read: "I wonder how long it'll be before we're allowed to wear our trenchcoats anymore. You know those screwed up kids in Colorado were wearing them, so that means I will also kill someone, and so will all my friends."

Timm Mackley, the school district's superintendent, said the Web site was obscene and had a threatening tone. He suspended the students, but the ACLU successfully fought their expulsion.

"The students were engaging in protected speech, off campus," Daniels said. "The school says they can punish them for that type of speech and behavior. What's next? Regulating conversations off campus?"

A consultant on school security cautioned that while there may be some overreaction, heightened awareness now may be uncovering real threats that predate Littleton, as well as "spinoff-type incidents."

"We keep getting asked the question, 'Is Littleton a wake-up call?' My question is, are we going to hit the snooze button and go to sleep?" said Kenneth Trump,

president of National School Safety and Security Services in Cleveland.

"Firm, fair and consistent enforcement of school rules and the law" is the only recourse for school administrators, Trump said Friday.

ACLU officials said most of the complaints they're hearing deal with teens getting in trouble for wearing trenchcoats or dressing in black. Some other cases:

— A 13-year-old Arizona boy was given in-school detention for carrying an electronics magazine with ads for guns. The boy was arrested when he drew a cartoon showing the school blowing up.

— A 14-year-old Pennsylvania girl was suspended for telling a teacher in a class conversation on the Littleton shootings that she could understand how someone who is teased endlessly could snap.

— An Illinois student was questioned by a psychiatrist for 1 1/2 hours about the video games he plays and asked if he ever looks for bomb-making instructions on the Internet.

"It really scares me. Anybody who doesn't fit into a specific category or dresses differently or is considered a

nerd or a geek, all of a sudden they're a suspect.

The students are losing their constitutional rights," said Andy Brumme, staff counsel for the ACLU in South Carolina.

Brumme represented a 17-year-old North Augusta, S.C., student who was suspended for criticizing his principal and ROTC teachers at Midland Valley High School. On his personal Web page, he told ROTC teachers to "eat feces and die."

School administrators had talked to the teen about the Web site before but didn't take action until after the Colorado shootings.

"It's ludicrous to think that's a threat," Brumme said.

"People are reacting instead of thinking." Brumme said the student had a good case but agreed to remove the criticism and apologize so he could graduate and go on to college this fall.

Brumme said he was considering filing a complaint after police searched three suburban Columbia high school students who were sent to the principal's office for wearing all black.

He said one of the students was asked why he was carrying a chemistry book.

"Schools are saying that school safety comes first and students' rights second. That's wrong," said Eleanor Eisenberg, executive director of the ACLU in Arizona.

New promoters aim to make their mark in Vegas

Catisha Marsh
Sentinel-Voice

An up and coming promotion company, Strickly Flavor, Las Vegas, is throwing its first monthly "swinging shindig" at the Official All Star Cafe, 3785 S. Las Vegas Blvd., Friday, May 21.

The event, "Uncle Phatbeats (U.P.B.)", touts the best talent in today's cutting edge music. Deejays such as DJ Phanness and Supreme, and other artists from Las Vegas, Los Angeles and San Francisco will be on hand to flex their skills. "Hip hop, rave, reggae are not about violence," said Mike Johns, president of Strickly Flavor. "U.P.B. is unique in that it attracts a vast array of nationalities—white, black, chinese, mexican—in peace."

Hip hop and R&B will be featured on the third floor at the All Star. Reggae and dancehall will be on the second tier. The ho-down starts at 11:30 p.m. and you can purchase tickets at ETMs in Von's stores.

For more information, call (800) 971-8581 or visit the website at www.stricklyflavor.com

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