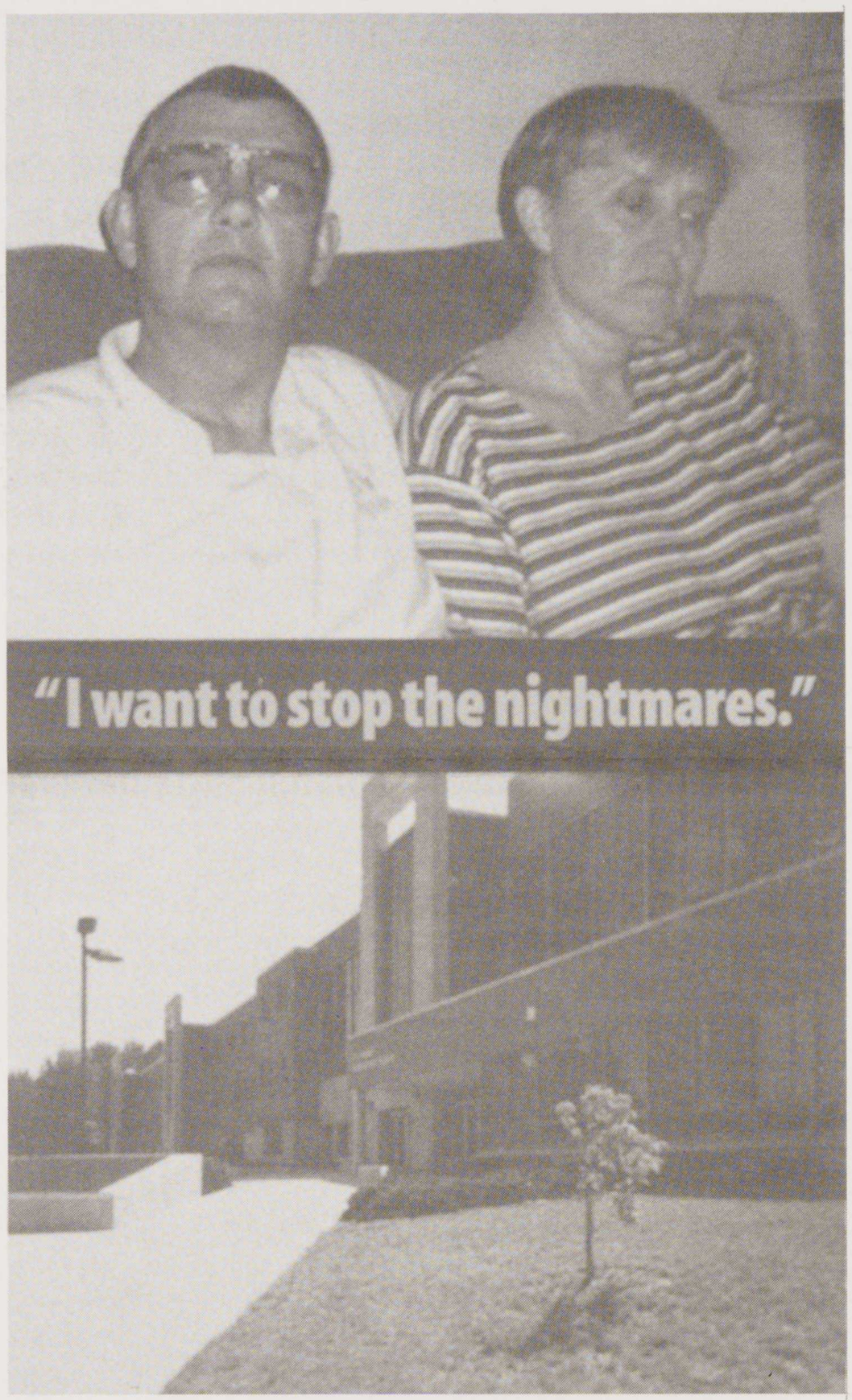
last year by Rep. Steve Largent (R-Okla.), is so vital. Mr. Largent says the new bill would "erect a defensive shield for responsible parents to direct the upbringing of their children."

The bill has received broad support across the nation, including 74 percent of all Americans and 58 percent of self-described "liberal Democrats," according to a Luntz Research Poll. Twenty-eight states have already considered language to guard parental rights. "The parental rights debate boils down to this question," says Jeffrey Bell, who chairs Of The People, a nonprofit group formed to help promote such legislation. "Who should decide what's in the best interests of children—their parents or the government?"

Pennsylvania Family Institute's research and project director, Tom Shaheen, notes that with President Clinton's push for national Goals 2000 standards, including increased in-school medical treatment for all children, parents in Pennsylvania and beyond might expect more mishaps resembling the one at J.T. Lambert. "These situations could become commonplace."



"You have to stand up on the highest mountain and defend her": Susie's parents, Paul and Katie Tucker; pictured below is the J.T. Lambert school.

The controversy over the exams has rocked this otherwise peaceful area. Phone calls, some of them threatening and anonymous, flooded the school office, as well as some of the school employees' homes. Letters to the editor poured into the local newspaper, the *Pocono Record*.

Many letter writers argued that, whether the school was within its legal parameters to demand an examination for genital warts, it exceeded its limits by forcing the examination on children without explicit parental consent. One person wrote: "In our society... if you want to have sex with me on a date, but I don't consent, it's called date rape. Consent is the issue—not state guidelines, not the doctor's technique."

At a hearing called to discuss the controversy, Susie Tucker stood in front of a crowd of parents and school officials and bravely explained her ordeal. She described the fear she felt by being forced to lie on a table, spread her legs, and submit to internal probing of her genitalia for the very first time. In the midst of her testimony, she began crying, as the assistant school superintendent stood staring impassively nearby.

Susie's father came and placed his arm around her. His glare at the assistant superintendent said more than a thousand words. Another mother—one whose sixth-grade daughter had not undergone the examination—stood and said the school district had "raped the girls of their dignity."

The doctor hired by the school to perform the examination, Dr. Ramlah Vahanvaty—herself a graduate of the intermediate school—eventually resigned under pressure. In an interview with the *Pocono Record*, Dr. Vahanvaty said she couldn't remember if the children had been crying during her exams, but she insisted her examinations had been in the interest of the children and were appropriate.

"Even a parent doesn't have the right to say what's appropriate for a physician to do when they're doing an exam," she told the newspaper, adding that the exams involved "retract[ing] the [labia]" in contradiction to the school district, which has maintained that the exams were only visual.

The school district has been under pressure to explain its actions. It claims it sent several written notices to parents informing them of the need for a thorough physical, including a gynecological examination, for all incoming sixth-grade girls; parents could have their family physician conduct the exam, or leave it to the district. The Tuckers and other families insist they never received notice. Some who did get notice insist it did not sufficiently stipulate that genital exams would occur.

The district has its supporters. The local medical society and many local teachers circled the wagons to protect their own. Doctors expressed vocal support for Dr. Vahanvaty, saying there is a wide-ranging spectrum of what is appropriate in such exams. Teachers wore blue ribbons at school to show solidarity with the doctor and nurses against the claims of the children.

Although the district's conduct offended many parents, it was not illegal, according to an investigation by the Pennsylvania State Police. The school district summarized the investigation's conclusion: "There were no improprieties on the part of the physician or district employees."

The district would like to put the whole matter to rest, but the young girls have not been able to forget their ordeal. Several have reported feeling pain during, and as a result of, the exam; one girl began spotting after undergoing the procedure. And Susie Tucker has been subjected to ongoing ridicule by district officials and others. One local columnist wrote that Susie and her parents were involved in creating "hysteria" over the issue.

Susie's parents are now trying to protect her from the media. These days Susie sits in her room quietly as her parents offer interviews in the adjoining family room. Paul and Katie say they won't expose her to any more criticism. Her room is not the childlike haven it was six months ago.

Susie's privacy has been violated. She knows that some people say she is overreacting, that she is a baby. They forget that they are talking about a little girl who was jerked abruptly from her Cinderella dreams and thrust into a spotlight she didn't ask for. Susie Tucker's wish is simple: "I want to stop the insomnia, the waking up at 2 a.m. and not being able to get back to sleep. I want to stop the nightmares."

JOE MAXWELL FOR WORLD