

Voices for the voiceless

Tulsa Lawyers for Children provides volunteer attorneys to serve as advocates for children in need.

by JOY JENKINS

Anne Sublett never realized how powerful a law license could be.

Over the last 18 years, she has reached out to children in the direst of circumstances, acting as their voice in the courts and bringing them assurance and hope. She has also created connections with young people she had never before met and become a lasting part of their lives.

Although her professional work is focused on employee benefits law and executive compensation, Sublett's volunteer work with Tulsa Lawyers for Children has opened a world of opportunities. It has provided a means of assisting with cases that, when settled, result in more than dollar figures. Often, they result in a new life for a child in need.

"You figure you're going to be a main character in your own life, but to play an important role in someone else's life with whom you have no natural connection is really an outstanding thing," Sublett says.

Sublett's work with children began in 1993 when her law firm, Conner & Winters, agreed to provide free legal representation to children involved in delinquency or deprived cases. Although Sublett had never served as a litigator, she volunteered.

In 1994, Conner & Winters was assigned a case involving three sisters, the oldest of which had allegedly been sexually abused. The lawyer to whom the case was assigned, a male, felt that the girl would be more comfortable talking to Sublett and asked her to get involved with the case.

She did, and although, from that moment on, the sisters lived in foster care, Sublett remained in contact with them and still talks with them regularly.

Over the next few years, Sublett and her firm took on dozens of cases involving children in Tulsa County.

In 2000, the Tulsa County Bar Association asked Sublett to work alongside Chief Juvenile Judge **Doris Fransein** to replicate an Oklahoma City program called Oklahoma Lawyers for Children in Tulsa. That program recruits volunteer attorneys to represent abused, neglected and deprived children in the Juvenile Division of the Oklahoma District courts.

The Tulsa program, however, would provide volunteer attorneys to children in abuse or neglect cases when the assigned public defender had a conflict of interest. Conflicts of interest arise when a public defender is also appointed to a parent, such as in criminal proceedings, or when multiple children are part of a case but have differing desires for the outcome.

Within months, Sublett and Fransein had established Tulsa Lawyers for Children (TLC) as a 501(c)3



Barbara Sears

nonprofit organization, recruited a board of directors, connected with local service providers involved with the child welfare system and organized the first training session for volunteers.

Now, TLC includes more than 100 attorneys in corporate law, private practice, law firms and even government entities. In 2010, 30 children, from birth to age 18, were referred to the program for representation and a total of 220 children received representation, says **Barbara Sears**, who became TLC's executive director in 2006. Several foundations, as well as donations from attorneys, support the program.

In addition to its core program, TLC offers two supporting programs: the TU Law Student Pro Bono Project, allowing University of Tulsa law students to assist TLC's volunteer attorneys, as well as the Shelter Visitation & Show Cause Hearing Project.

Through the latter project, volunteers, both trained attorneys and non-attorneys, interview children within 48 hours of placement at the Laura Dester Shelter. The volunteers then represent the children as guardians ad litem at "show cause" hearings held before petitions are filed against parents in deprivation cases.

Sears says TLC has not only benefited children and the judges who request volunteer attorneys, but it has also benefited the attorneys themselves.

"When they get an opportunity like this, there are several of these lawyers who say, 'This is why I went to law school,' and with attorneys who ... maybe

have gotten into their rut of everything they do on a day-to-day basis, this is an opportunity for them to remember why they went to law school," she says. "... Even in one case, representing one child, they may not see the overall picture, but they will change the world by just giving that child competent, quality legal representation at a time when they needed it the most."

Paul Naylor has experienced these benefits. A plaintiff's lawyer working primarily in personal injury and medical malpractice suits, Naylor had reached his fourth decade of practicing law and wanted to find a way to give back. After starting a mentoring program at Eugene Field Elementary School, he had grown disheartened by the transient nature of the student population. One particularly challenging day, he returned to his office and found a brochure for TLC. He promptly signed up for a training session.

Six years later, Naylor is TLC's board president and takes on some of the organization's challenging cases. He often travels around the state to meet with clients, some with whom he's remained in contact for years. He also visits the Laura Dester Shelter weekly to interview children and he mentors new TLC volunteers.

For Naylor, the children are more than just clients. He creates lasting bonds with them, encouraging them to call whenever they need help.

"I've had some large, seven-figure verdicts before, which is good, but I have never had the exhilaration, the feeling I had just helping these kids," he says. "I don't know how to really describe it. It's just a great feeling."

Of course, the work of a TLC volunteer can also be heartbreaking and frustrating. While TLC attorneys are required to represent the child's wishes, sometimes those desires go unfulfilled, Sears says. Families are reunited, only to be broken up by drugs or abuse. Children move from foster home to foster home. The effects of childhood neglect and abuse take a psychological toll.

It's at this point when Sublett says that she gives herself the "I'm Not God" speech.

"The role of a lawyer, while it can be incredibly powerful, it can also be incredibly powerless," she says. "... You have to recognize that you cannot erase a child's past, you can't fix the past, you can't even fix the present. What you can do is utilize the tools that the law gives you to help a child move to the next step." ☞

For more information about Tulsa Lawyers for Children, visit www.tulsalawyersforchildren.org.