



The Advocate

A Publication of the W. W. Caruth, Jr. Child Advocacy Clinic
Southern Methodist University Dedman School of Law

Volume I, Number 1

Fall/Winter 2007

W.W. Caruth Jr. Child Advocacy Clinic Alumni Share Their Experiences and the Impact it had on Their Lives

Since 2002, the W.W. Caruth, Jr. Child Advocacy Clinic has served the Dallas community by providing *pro bono* legal representation to abused and neglected children and training law students to be Guardian/Attorney *ad Litem*s (“GAL/AAL”) for children. Almost 100 students have participated in the Caruth Clinic. They are afforded the opportunity to gain hands-on, practical legal experience that they can later utilize in their own practice, such as communicating with clients, drafting legal documents, preparing for and conducting hearings and trials, appearing before a judge, and various other legal tasks.

Given the specific interest of most Caruth Clinic students in children and community service, several former Clinic students have gone on to participate in the area of family and child welfare law. Many alumni cite a particular experience in the Caruth Clinic as their motivation for pursuing a career in family law or as a GAL/AAL.

Alumni Chris Howard '03, who serves as a GAL in Missouri, said about his Clinic experience:



“During my year at the clinic, I represented an 11 year old boy during a trying 7 month period in which

he lived in four different places: his father’s home, a foster home, a psychiatric hospital, and a therapeutic care center. What the boy needed most was a steady, reliable hand to guide him

through those difficult transitions. This was a life-altering lesson for me, seeing first hand the difference a caring adult can make in a child’s life. Representing this child was extremely draining at times, but it was also the best thing I did while I was in law school, hands down.”

Alumni who do not solely practice in family or child welfare law can serve as GAL/AAL for children in addition to their primary practice areas. In Dallas County, attorneys must complete a state bar approved 3.0 hour CLE in the area of child welfare law, submit a GAL/AAL application with the juvenile district court coordinator, and be approved by the Juvenile District Court Judges to be placed on the court appointment list. As new cases are filed, attorneys are appointed by the Court to serve as a GAL/AAL.

Alumni Matt Thomas '04, who works for a family law firm and serves as a GAL/AAL, said:



“Legally these are not the most complex cases, but anyone who speaks legal language can go down there and help out. Every lawyer could benefit themselves and a child for free. The work is enjoyable and rewarding.”

Although the complexity of legal issues varies in child welfare cases, the level of knowledge needed to serve as an effective GAL/AAL is extensive. In addition to honing their legal skills in the clinic, students also receive inter-

disciplinary training. Clinic students have the opportunity to be trained by professionals from other relevant areas, such as medicine, psychology, child development, special education, social work, and law enforcement.

Kathleen Turton '04, who has served numerous times as a GAL/AAL and also works for a family law firm, shared her experience serving as a GAL:



“I enjoy working as a GAL, an AAL, or an Amicus Attorney because it gives me the opportunity to communicate with families and the court as an advocate of the child, as opposed

to my usual role as a zealous advocate for the client that is a parent and/or conservator of the child. Parents may, at times, get stuck in their positions and not necessarily put the children’s best interest first. As the advocate for the child and the child alone, I can do something to make the child’s life better.”

Clinic students have an opportunity not only to perform legal functions, such as appearing before a judge or drafting petitions, but if they go on and pursue a career in family/child welfare law, they also gain

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exposure to the CPS system and the issues that accompany it.

Saadia Memon '03 gained valuable lessons through her participation in the clinic, which

The Director's Chair

By Jessica Dixon, Director of the W.W. Caruth, Jr. Child Advocacy Clinic



It has been my distinct pleasure to serve as Director of the W.W. Caruth, Jr. Child Advocacy Clinic for the past six years. What a dream job! Teaching law students how to represent abused and neglected children has been challenging and fun. Each semester presents fresh faces of students who are overly enthusiastic about participating in the child advocacy clinic. After their semester ends in the clinic, many of them stop by or email me

to ask about how their case worked out and what happened to the children they represented. One thing is for sure – the children definitely left an impression upon them.

Recently a student and I appeared before substitute Judge Diana Herrera in the 304th Juvenile District Court. Judge Herrera reminisced about her law school days almost 25 years ago and stated that she could not be more grateful for the opportunity the SMU Legal Clinics provided her. Being part of a memorable experience for a law school student is one of the most fulfilling parts of my job.

I love to represent children. Empowering their voices in court and

creating a path for a better life overshadows the sometimes gutwrenching details of their abuse or neglect. The Child Advocacy Clinic has provided *pro bono* legal representation for almost 100 children who were removed from their parent(s) by Child Protective Services. I would like to thank all of my students for their dedication to children and the time they commit to doing any *pro bono* legal work. For those who continue to represent abused and neglected children as guardian *ad litem*, keep up the good work!



2007-2008 Child Advocacy Clinic Director and student attorneys.

Clinic Hosts 2007 Dallas Youth at Risk Roundtable

Every day, our nation's young people, ages 13 through 19, are facing complex problems including severe abuse, chronic neglect, domestic and dating violence, poor and violent neighborhoods, unmet mental and physical health needs, emotional or behavioral problems, gangs, poor peer group choices and relationships, and poor educational options.

To combat this growing dilemma, American Bar Association President Karen J. Mathis created a Commission on Youth at Risk. This

commission is examining topics of concern such as those mentioned above, as well as working to enhance laws, judicial intervention strategies, policies, practices and programs to help prevent teens from becoming delinquent or engaging in criminal acts.

As part of the ABA's mission, the Commission has established various "Youth at Risk Roundtables" across the country in an effort to bring together various professionals who work with youth at risk. Through these roundtables

the ABA hopes to establish an open dialogue on identifying local issues affecting youth, as well as innovative solutions on how to combat these complex issues. The W.W. Caruth, Jr. Child Advocacy Clinic hosted a Youth at Risk Roundtable in Dallas at SMU Dedman

School of Law on May 23, 2007. The Roundtable was moderated by the Clinic's Director, Jessica Dixon, and included special guest, ABA President Karen Mathis, and several professionals in the Dallas area, such as executive directors of children's organizations, a juvenile public defender, the chief juvenile district attorney, judges, social workers, religious leaders, and other non-profit community leaders.

There was great dialogue between participants about services for foster youth in transition and truant youth in the Dallas Independent School District.

Some of the suggestions for additional services for foster youth include: literacy programs; more emergency shelters; free *continued on page 4 ...*



ABA President Karen Mathis at the Youth at Risk Roundtable at SMU.

2006 Child Welfare Symposium Held at SMU Dedman Law

The W.W. Caruth, Jr. Child Advocacy Clinic at the SMU Dedman School of Law hosted its second Child Welfare Symposium on Nov. 16-17, 2006. The symposium focused on the disproportionate number of African-American children in the child welfare system. "Ideas about solutions were shared, and attendees left with tools to plow forward on the issue of disproportionality," said Jessica Dixon, Lecturer in Law and Director of the W.W. Caruth, Jr. Child Advocacy Clinic. "I ran into a symposium presenter at another conference later in the year, and she told me that she used the Texas legislative model from Senate Bill 6 to secure similar legislation in Washington State regarding research and mandated state agency policy changes to address disproportionality. This success story is exactly the reason why our symposium is important to the national child welfare agenda."

The Keynote address was presented by Dorothy Roberts (pictured right), who is the Kirkland & Ellis Professor of Law at Northwestern University School of Law.

"Disproportionality in the child welfare system is a complex problem with no easy remedy," Roberts said in her closing remarks. "As such, it can only be resolved through radical reform. Advocates for proportionality therefore must answer an important question: are we prepared to fundamentally change our understanding of the system's purpose? To further complicate matters, the problem has not been adequately studied. Thus, there is no consensus on the best approach, and state and federal authorities should mandate further research on the subject, along with potential solutions. Rather than give in to the current reality of the situation, the child welfare system should recognize the ill effects of disproportionality and implement new policies that will help ensure the best interests of children from every community."

The interdisciplinary composition of the symposium provided an opportunity for the issues to be addressed from multiple angles by attorneys, social workers, judges, doctors, therapists, psychologists, and educators.



Dorothy Roberts, the Kirkland & Ellis Professor at Northwestern University School of Law

The presentations and panel discussions identified social and legal challenges that affect African-American children and families, such as: bias in mandatory reporting of child abuse by teachers, counselors, and medical professionals, as well as caseworkers own prejudices and perceptions of what they define as abuse and neglect affecting removal decisions.

Community Advisory Group Established To Promote Change

The W.W. Caruth, Jr. Child Advocacy Clinic at the SMU Dedman School of Law established a Community Advisory Group (CAG) in 2005 to create and encourage positive change throughout the child welfare system.

CAG is a multidisciplinary group that is comprised of legal, medical, mental health, educational, social work, and volunteer professionals who work with abused and neglected children and their families. In addition to these professionals, CAG also includes the voice of foster parents, foster children, and kinship care providers.

One of the ways that CAG may generate improvements within the child welfare process is by providing educational forums for family and juvenile court judges, various county and state officials, and at risk families in the community.

In order to address specific issues and challenges in the child welfare field, CAG created the Psychotropic Medication Subcommittee. The goals of the Psychotropic Medication Subcommittee were to: select a method for meaningful oversight for prescriptions of psychotropic medications to children in state care and to determine a resolution for

settling disputes regarding psychotropic medical care.

A major accomplishment of the subcommittee was the creation of a new review form for Juvenile Court Judges to use in order to evaluate the psychotropic medications prescribed for each child in foster care.

CPS agreed to have its case workers submit this new review form periodically throughout the 12 to 18 month period when a child remains in foster care. The form will also be used after a child has been made a permanent ward of the state. It is being considered for statewide use by CPS, and is the first part of the solution in Texas to what has become a national problem in the foster care system.

The Psychotropic Medication Subcommittee also provided training for Dallas County Juvenile District Court and Associate Judges regarding the various types and side effects of psychotropic drugs prescribed for children. The judges were extremely appreciative of this training.

Alumni Experiences

she has utilized in her practice at Legal Aid of Northwest Texas.

“The clinic was the best thing in law school. I recom-



mend all young attorneys to participate in the experience. Jessica Dixon is a great teacher and she really makes you feel confident about your legal abilities. Not only is it an excellent opportunity to ‘feel like an attorney,’ but it motivated me for a career in public interest.”

No matter what field of law students enter, there is almost universal consensus among alumni that their involvement in the Child Advocacy Clinic was their “favorite thing they did in law school.” As Ms. Memon says, “helping children helps prevent the cycle of abuse.” It is with this hope that the Clinic continues to educate future generations of young lawyers.



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Youth At Risk Roundtable

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tutoring for youth at risk; and better connection between services.

Mentoring and parent education was the focus of discussion regarding prevention of truancy. Ideas about how the legal community can help to prevent many problems among youth at risk included: expanding the number of externships available to law students that focus on organizations that work with youth at risk; encouraging retired lawyers work *pro bono* with various service organizations; recruiting more lawyers or law students serving as mentors to youth at risk; creating a database of web information that professionals serving youth can access (Texas Lawyers for Children meets this need for lawyers and judges); and encouraging the Texas State Bar to create a Commission on Youth at Risk.

It is the hope of the Child Advocacy Clinic that this roundtable was only the beginning of more cross-collaborative efforts between professionals who serve youth at risk in the North Texas region.

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