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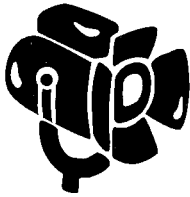
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Spotlight on Public Interest Attorneys: Cook County Public Guardian's Office Immigrant Children's Advocacy Project

by JANELLE SKALOUD

MARIA WOLTJEN

DIRECTOR, IMMIGRANT CHILDREN'S ADVOCACY PROJECT



"Unaccompanied immigrant children are among the most vulnerable," says Maria Woltjen, founder of the Immigrant Children's Advocacy Project. Woltjen launched the project in 2004 to provide advocacy to immigrant and refugee children who are alone in the United States. Now based at the Legal Clinic at the University of Chicago Law School, the project trains and supervises bilingual law students and volunteers who serve as Child Protection Advocates. These advocates work with unaccompanied children who have been

detained by the government to determine what brought them to the United States, whether they are eligible for asylum and other protective relief, and to advocate for their best interests in the courts and with government agencies.

“I love my work,” says Woltjen. “Candidly, it can be stressful because the stakes are so high, but it’s also precisely that reason that makes the cases and the issues so compelling.” The children the project serves come from all over world, often fleeing political upheaval, extreme poverty, child labor and abusive homes. Some children come to reunite with family members already in the United States. The children are either transported to the United States by traffickers or hired smugglers, or make the journey alone. Sometimes they are too young to understand why they are here.

In an average week, Woltjen divides her time between supervising the Child Advocates, overseeing cases, and consulting with others around the country to develop a national network of Child Advocates. She spends at least one day meeting with the staff at the International Children’s Center (ICC), a shelter in Chicago that serves as a temporary home to unaccompanied immigrant children. She meets at least once a week with colleagues at the National Immigrant Justice Center to review cases. She also accompanies children to Immigration Court along with their advocates. Woltjen spends her remaining time meeting with students and volunteers, reviewing advocacy letters on behalf of individual children, and answering correspondences from attorneys and government officials regarding current cases.

Woltjen has been dedicated to public interest work throughout her legal career. Before starting the Immigrant Children’s Advocacy Project, she litigated *pro bono* cases while at Coffield, Ungaretti, Harris & Slavin. She has also been the director of the Children’s Rights Project of the Chicago Lawyer’s Committee and worked for several years at the ChildLaw Center at Loyola University Chicago.

For more information about the Immigrant Children’s Advocacy Project, visit <http://www.immigrantchildadvocacy.org>.

JENNIFER CAMPOBELLO
GUARDIAN AD LITEM (GAL), COOK COUNTY PUBLIC GUARDIAN'S OFFICE



“When I discovered the Public Guardian’s Office in my first year of law school, I knew right away that I wanted to work there,” says Jennifer Campobello, a Guardian ad Litem (GAL) in the Juvenile Division of the Public Guardian’s Office. Campobello has been with the Public Guardian’s Office since receiving her J.D. from Loyola University Chicago School of Law in 2003.

The Juvenile Division handles cases of child abuse and neglect that have entered the court system once the Illinois Department of Child and Family Services (DCFS) has determined that a child or children needs to be removed from the home. As a GAL, Campobello serves a dual purpose: she presents the children’s wishes to the court as their attorney, and she advocates as a Guardian ad Litem for the children’s best interests to the court and other agencies.

Campobello divides her time between court, the office, and going out “in the field.” Handling what she says is a manageable case load of around 60 to 70 families at a time, she helps navigate children through the multiple stages of the court system, from the initial point when their parents are charged with abuse and neglect and, if the children become wards of the state, through the subsequent stages of visitation, returning home, termination of parental rights, and possibly adoption.

Campobello also spends a considerable amount of time ensuring DCFS is doing its job as the children’s state guardian which, she says, “can be very frustrating.” When not in court, Campobello makes home visits to clients and attends staff meetings with caseworkers, schools, psychiatric facilities, and other agencies working with the children.

Campobello has known she wanted to work as an advocate for children since she was an undergraduate, when she volunteered as a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) for children and families in abuse and neglect cases. She came to Loyola University Chicago School of Law because of the unique ChildLaw program, and spent every summer while she was in law school clerking for the Public Guardian's Office. "I love doing the work I do," says Campobello. "The most rewarding part of my job is seeing children reunite with their families or get adopted, and knowing that they are on track to a better life."

For more information about the Cook County Public Guardian's Office, visit <http://www.publicguardian.org>.