

# Planting an Acorn to Protect a Child

by Zig Pines

*(The first Pennsylvania Children's Roundtable Summit, sponsored by the AOPC's Office of Children and Families in the Courts, was held Nov. 19-21 in Pittsburgh. To highlight how far we have come in a short period of time, I offered the following remarks at the opening session. This initiative's history and progress are worth documenting.)*

Last year at one of our children's roundtables, I recall seeing in the hotel lobby a large poster-board for a companion event. It said, "Great oaks from little acorns grow." If I had to pick a metaphor for our judicial system's initiative to protect abused and neglected children, it would be the acorn.

Some of you may have noticed the bumper crop of acorns this year. (My staff tells me that it's nature's warning of a tough winter!) The acorn contains a single seed enclosed in a tough leathery shell. It generally takes six to 24 months to mature. Acorns are one of the most important sources of food for wildlife. In literature and mythology, acorns are the symbol of wisdom, patience, good luck, affection and the fruition of long hard labor. Hence the proverb, "Great oaks from little acorns grow."

Our juvenile dependency effort, in many ways, started as a little acorn. In 2005 former Chief Justice of Pennsylvania **Ralph J. Cappy** and I attended a national conference for chief justices and state court administrators. After one of our joint meetings, Chief Justice Cappy and I had a conversation with the now-retired Chief Judge of the State of New York Judith S. Kaye. In the course of the conversation, Chief Judge Kaye spoke passionately about what New York's judiciary was doing for abused and neglected children. In her soft—yet effective—advocate style, she urged Pennsylvania to look into New York's program.

So in 2005 the acorn of an idea was carried back to Pennsylvania. Chief Justice Cappy then approached one of our jurists who has dedicated his judicial career to the cause of juvenile justice—Supreme Court Justice **Max Baer**. If you know Justice Baer, you can imagine what his reaction was when offered the opportunity to do pioneering work for our kids in Pennsylvania. In fact, on prior occasions Justice Baer has told me that juvenile justice was perhaps the prime motivator in why he sought a seat on our Supreme Court.

In 2006 Justice Max Baer, with seed money from the federal government, took the acorn and planted it. He was instrumental in helping to create a mini-corporate entity within the AOPC, the Office of Children and Family in the Courts (OCFC). He assembled a team and allocated a division of labor to cultivate the fields. He worked with our first hire, another dedicated public servant, Andrea Jelin, to come up with an amazing juvenile justice infrastructure of "roundtables" to cover all our judicial districts. This three-tiered infrastructure would bring a vast array of "gardeners," so to speak, who had a vital stake in the growth of this acorn.

Later, Justice Baer searched high and low for a "horticultural expert" who knew precisely how to fertilize the Pennsylvania fields and manage a team for optimal growth. The person he found was none other than **Sandy Moore**, a person, like Justice Baer, who demonstrates compassion, passion and competence in the field of juvenile justice. In her role as OCFC's administrator, she has done truly exceptional work.

Today, approximately three years after the planting of the acorn, we are here all together. And look at what has been accomplished for abused and neglected children in our state in such a short time span—the formalized collaboration of vital stakeholders, enhanced judicial involvement and oversight, the collection and dissemination of information in almost all of our counties via an impressive case management system for dependency cases, educational training to improve the lives of children, the creation of a judicial bench book and Web site, and the identification of best practices (such as family-finding and family group decision-making). Last but not least, these collective efforts have led to this inaugural children's summit in Pittsburgh, similar in concept to the three national summits (Minnesota, New York and Texas) that Justice Baer and team members have attended. We are seeing the growth of a mighty oak tree.

I have said on prior occasions that the work that you do is truly noble and gratifying. We only need to look at the grim statistics to realize how daunting your task is.

From 2001-07, there were approximately 10,440 reported cases of child abuse and neglect. Many believe that the number is unrealistic because of severe

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undercounting caused by poor reporting and inconsistent definitions. Regardless of bureaucratic definitions, we all know in our minds and hearts about the vast spectrum of child abuse and neglect—inadequate food, clothing, shelter, hygiene, education, care and protection; medical neglect; and the unimaginable instances of physical/sexual/emotional abuse that have contributed to permanent injuries and even the deaths of young children.

We know, for example, that the incidence of child abuse and neglect in the United States is three times higher than Canada's and 11 times greater than Italy's. Recently in our newspapers, it was reported that poverty in America is at an all time high—approximately one in five children in the U.S. lives in poverty. Poverty is perhaps the best predictor of child abuse and neglect. According to these statistics, nearly half a million in the developmentally critical years younger than six were going hungry. That's three times the number in 2006.

Nevertheless, the silver lining in this cloud is that Pennsylvania is ranked as No. 2 in its child welfare spending per capita. And Pennsylvania, notwithstanding the recent tragic events in one of our counties, has

a reputation for excellence in juvenile justice. We have that national reputation because of dedicated servants such as Estelle Richman, Jim Anderson, Richard Gold, Frank Cervone, Marc Cherna, our president judges and family law judges, the AOPC's OCFC and automation staffs, and all of you in this audience.

In this harsh economy and with our weakened safety net, your work in protecting children is of profound practical importance to the welfare of society. The presence and support of Chief Justice Castille at this summit is a testament to the significance of your work.

All of us here have every reason to be proud of the outstanding achievements that have been done for abused and neglected children in Pennsylvania during the past three years. This new oak as it matures will continue to provide protection and sustenance for our children. In turn, this oak will produce many acorns of incredible potential.

As we continue this noble mission, I think we all secretly carry within us an acorn of wisdom that was expressed more than 100 years ago by a wise man, Frederick Douglas. He said, *"It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men."*

Thank-you for all your efforts.

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The logo for the Allegheny Office of Public Child Welfare (AOPC) features the letters 'AOPC' in a bold, blue, sans-serif font. The letter 'O' is stylized as a circle with a small triangle pointing downwards inside it.