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# Movers & Makers

March 2022

Cincinnati

FOCUS ON:

## Children & Youth

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Breaking the cycle of trauma

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# BREAKING THE CYCLE OF TRAUMA

Kids need advocates who SEE them, HEAR them, SPEAK UP for them

By Julie Kemble Borths

The 16-year-old is missing school again today. His mother never came home last night and he is out looking for food for his little brother and sister. With no money, he knows he may need to steal something. Will anyone notice?

The 12-year-old is wearing a huge sweatshirt and her hair is hanging in her face. She wants to be invisible so that her mom's boyfriend doesn't see her or try to touch her again. Will anyone see her?

The 6-month-old is wailing on a tattered blanket on the floor. His mother is on the couch, passed out from a drug overdose. Will anyone hear him?



Judge Melissa Powers

Every day in Greater Cincinnati, children like these need adults to raise them up in a world where it can seem the grownups have let them down.

Hamilton County Juvenile Court Judge Melissa Powers put it this way: "These children don't have the hope they need to thrive. What these kids often need is someone to count on, to encourage them. The attentiveness of one adult in their life can make all the difference."

## Dependency and delinquency

As administrative judge, Powers oversees a court that has been overwhelmed during the pandemic. As it oversees dependency cases, the court sees the pain of child abuse and neglect. In delinquency cases, it sees the disturbing increase in violence among children, including with guns.

"The violence we are seeing shows the cycle

of trauma in so many families," said Powers. "The parents suffered and now the children suffer. You have to build resiliency to overcome trauma. But we are seeing an acute crisis with our kids: aggression, gun violence, bullying."

Powers noted that children have struggled with mental health issues, particularly because of isolation, during the pandemic. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, there was a 31% increase in mental health-related emergency room visits for young people in 2020. That number continued to grow in 2021.

Untreated mental health issues, lack of in-person school and routine, families under stress and a growing hostility on social media added up to more cases coming before the court, Powers suggests. In 2021, there were 19,732 juvenile court cases, compared to 16,433 in 2020. About a third of the cases – which can include more than one child – were child abuse and neglect filings.

Many of those children are in the custody of Hamilton County Jobs & Family Services. Removed from unsafe homes, these children go into the county's care. For many of these children – more than 2,600 were in county custody in 2021 – the goal is reunification with their parents. The court oversees where they live in the meantime and ultimately decides who will raise the child.

It's a complex and frustrating system for adults. And for children, it is even more confusing.

At the Children's Law Center, a nonprofit advocacy agency in Northern Kentucky, attorneys supported by donations and grants represent children and young adults in areas like child welfare, juvenile justice and education. "We come in at a crucial juncture for these kids," said Executive Director Sasha Naiman. "We want to help children get to their bright future and

make sure the systems support them."

Some of that advocacy for kids – also done by the Legal Aid Society of Greater Cincinnati – involves making sure children get the educational services they need and are required by law. That can mean supporting a family through expulsion hearings, as well as ensuring a child gets everything required in their specialized education plan for academic assistance or behavioral support.

"We make sure to view things from the child's perspective," Naiman said. "There is a whole set of state and federal laws regarding ... free and appropriate public education. Often, we need to advocate for that."

Naiman said the systems in place can sometimes forget the different needs of children at different stages. While a 7-month-old is very different from a 17-year-old, the legal world lumps them all together as juveniles with certain protections. Her staff makes sure to consider the differences among the young clients they serve, enabling older children to assert more autonomy and control if they are able.

They also consider what is behind behavior that may land a child in legal trouble. Often, a child who has experienced trauma will make "decisions we don't understand," Naiman noted. But because young people are "highly capable of rehabilitation and resilient," the team – along with others in juvenile justice – focuses on opportunities for that growth and maturity, rather than punishment.

Community volunteer Patti Hogan (more on Page 20) said that, when she first saw young



Sasha Naiman

teens on every street corner of her Price Hill neighborhood a decade ago, she focused on consequences. At meetings with the safety council of the Price Hill Community Action Team, she insisted the police step up enforcement.

“I was unforgiving,” she recalls. “But the police told me we cannot arrest ourselves out of these problems.”

The juvenile court has programs to divert young offenders from court and give them opportunities to think differently about their behavior. High school students participate in a peer-to-peer Youth Court, and diversion dockets are focused on certain neighborhoods and challenges such as substance abuse.

In these diversion programs, young, non-violent, first-time offenders encounter alternatives like community service, essay writing or therapeutic intervention. Heather Chura Smith, director of public relations and data for the juvenile court, doubles as a hearing officer in one of these programs. She said the emphasis is on “getting to know and understand these kids.”

In one case, for example, a middle-school boy was in trouble for fighting. He’d lost an older brother to gun violence and that made him more likely to engage in risky behaviors. But in getting to know the boy, they found that he liked being outside and really enjoyed animals.

For his community service, he began working in the community gardens. There, caring adult volunteers showed him a different path ... and he got to find lizards.

“His mother reported that he was always bringing home lizards in his pocket,” Chura Smith said. “That was a success: He was in a safe, healthy place where he could be a kid.”

## Disrupting the cycle

Just being a kid is a luxury some children just don’t have. Their family systems may include abuse and neglect going back generations. And for these children, the outlook is bleak. According to a study published in 2019 in *Neuroscience News*, abused and neglected children are four times more likely to develop a serious mental illness. And the National Institutes of Health noted in 2011 that abused children are nine times more likely to become

involved in criminal activity.

But most disturbing of all – abused and neglected children suffer post-traumatic stress disorder at a higher rate than returning war veterans, the *Journal of Pediatric Psychology* reported in 2010. This includes, the study noted, those children who live in a home filled with violence, even if they are not physically injured.

“We see the cycle of trauma a lot,” Judge Powers said. “The parents suffer and then their children suffer. We want to help build the resiliency they need to overcome that trauma.”

That’s why, on the dependency side of Juvenile Court – where magistrates and judges ultimately decide who will raise a child – the emphasis is on services for the parents as well as support for the children. While reunification is only one option for a child removed from their family, it is what most children really want.

For reunification to occur, the court and JFS use local agencies like Best Point Education and Behavioral Health (which in February changed its name from The Children’s Home) to provide counseling and education as well as a safe, therapeutic place for parents to meet with their children in JFS custody.

Karen Bankston (more on Page 21) is a board member for Best Point. She said programs like the Randall S. Bloch Family Visitation Center are part of the reason she gives her time to the agency.

“I was a teen mom myself,” Bankston said. “And my mother was a single mom who had been raised by my grandmother who lost her own mother when she was young. They didn’t pass on the notion of mothering ... of being warm.”

At the visitation center, and through other community programs, parents can learn skills – overseen by the court and JFS – and may be reunited with their children. In 2021, JFS reported that more than half of children in its custody were reunified with a parent or guardian or were living with another relative.

While children are in JFS custody, they may be living in a foster care home, a group home, a residential treatment facility or – for the oldest teens – in a supervised apartment learning how to live independently. This time can add to the trauma for a child who is suddenly moved away

from everything familiar, even though the goal is their safety.

“When we intervene, it should be the last resort,” said Margie Weaver, JFS director of children’s services. “The child protection system is reactive. Child maltreatment can be prevented when children and families have access to the right supports and resources in their communities to help them thrive.”

## Opportunities to help

Across the state, JFS has been moving toward more proactive strategies to keep children with their families. The pandemic, Weaver said, has complicated that work. There is a shortage of staff and of providers of therapy and other services, but there is no shortage of children who need help. The number of children coming into JFS custody dropped sharply at the start of the epidemic, but has rebounded with more than 2,600 children in 2021, including 835 who entered the system that year.

But while the numbers are “back to normal,” Weaver said the caseworkers are seeing issues that reflect the challenges of the pandemic. The staff is training with Cincinnati Children’s Hospital Medical Center to learn more about immediate intervention when children are a danger to themselves. An uptick in older children coming into the system means redoubling efforts to help them successfully “age out” of the system, becoming adults with the support they need to cope. “Often these kids are so lost,” Weaver said. “They face so many adverse outcomes ... like becoming homeless.”

Weaver said JFS relies on the community to advocate for children of all ages in ways large and small. Community members become adoptive parents as well as foster parents. They support JFS programs to provide “extras” for kids like sports fees. They can take action on policies and laws surrounding child protection and can provide support for funding through local taxes. And they can pay attention to the children they encounter and – in Hamilton County – call 513-241-KIDS to report suspected abuse and neglect. While studies show that only one in about 10 incidents of abuse are actually confirmed, many cases are never reported. ➔



## FOCUS ON: Children & Youth

One other way that community members advocate for these children is through programs like Hamilton County's ProKids. Weaver said these volunteers "share the same end goal in mind" with JFS and "can get so involved in the life of a child."

Known across the country as CASA Volunteers or Court Appointed Special Advocates, trained community members

speaking up for individual children, often those in foster care. ProKids has been empowering volunteers from all walks of life to do this work for 40 years.

In about 10 hours a month, each ProKids CASA Volunteer makes it more likely a child will get what they need

in school and the support they need from therapy, and move to a safe, permanent, nurturing home. Like the more than 93,000 CASA volunteers across 49 states, each ProKids volunteer speaks up for a single child or family of children, unlike those in the overburdened government system. These volunteers also may stay in a child's life much longer than other adults, enabling them to gain the trust of the families and children they serve.

ProKids Executive Director Tracy Cook said these volunteers prove that a single person can make a real difference. "I've never been more convinced by what one person can do," Cook said. "I've seen so many examples where one person was able to get children to a safe place when the systems could not" during the pandemic.

"It's an individual getting in there and saying 'How can we ...?'" Cook said. "I've never

thought more about our volunteers being the glue that is holding everything together, the people who figure out how to make this work."

With 331 CASA volunteers in 2021, ProKids served 1,101 children. But that's only about 42 percent of the children who need a CASA volunteer's advocacy.

Using virtual classrooms for its training program and encouraging socially distanced visits with children, ProKids continued its work during the pandemic, enabled by community donors who fund the staff that recruits, trains and supports each CASA volunteer. Cook said while the work of ProKids didn't change, the circumstances for the children it serves did.

"The sad thing is that these children were already in chaos. Now there's an extra layer," Cook said. "Then they are thrust into a system that even before the pandemic was under strain. It's heartbreaking."

## Hope and Possibilities

But CASA volunteers are able to focus their energies on what is possible. "These kids are in desperate situations," Cook said. "But as the pandemic wears on all of us, there's a way out of our own stress by approaching life with gratitude and compassion. And that's what being a CASA volunteer is."

Weaver agrees there are rewards in coming together for children. "I marvel every day at how resilient our children and our families are," she said. "There is a lot of room for optimism and hopefulness."

"We need to wake up," Cook said. "We have to stop thinking that someone else has got this. This is a community problem. It's going to take all hands on deck." ■

## Meet some volunteers

### Tim Dierker

Leaving a convenience store in Clifton, Tim Dierker was surprised when a young man ran up to him and said he knew him.

It took a minute, but Dierker realized the teenager had lived alongside another boy Dierker had served as a ProKids CASA Volunteer. "You used to come and see him all the time and you were so nice to him," the young man said. "And I found out later you were a volunteer! There's not a lot of people in the world like you."

Before he left, he gave Dierker a hug that Dierker would never forget. "You never know who you are going to impact," he said.

By standing up for abused and neglected children in juvenile court, giving the magistrate information to decide who can keep a child safe, Dierker said, the CASA volunteer "is the expert in that whole building on that kid. You never forget that you are there on behalf of that child."

There are tough moments and staggering stories that can take Dierker aback.

"As far as volunteer gigs go, there are easier gigs out there," Dierker said. "But I get so much more out of it than I put in."

Dierker became a CASA volunteer about 20 years ago. "You can complain all day long about the state of our country or the future of our children," he said. "Or you can do something about it."

Among the children Dierker has served, he has seen struggles he never imagined: children who had stolen dog food to eat off a neighbor's porch, traumatized kids who caused disruptions that got them moved again and again, foster parents who are "angels on this earth."

"I've met so many people I would never have met otherwise," Dierker said. "It gave me such an appreciation for my own life, my own upbringing."

### Patti Hogan

Ten years ago, Patti Hogan had a singular goal: to get the kids she saw in her neighborhood off the street.

Now, she cannot go down the street without running into one of



Tim Dierker



Tracy Cook

## What happened to you?

In a 2021 New York Times best seller by Oprah Winfrey and Dr. Bruce Perry, the question "What Happened to You?" described the impact of childhood trauma on developing brains, as well as how destructive experiences can throw shadows far into adulthood.

Known as Adverse Childhood Experiences, or ACEs – events such as a parent dying or going to prison, or being abused or neglected – can add up to a "score" that impacts not only relationships and behavior, but also brain

development and physical health.

By looking at "what happened to you" rather than "what's wrong with you," clinicians are finding they can unravel the cause of many issues that impact adults and children. As researchers have learned more about brain development, particularly in the very young, they've learned how devastating ACEs can be, as well as what interventions can help.

→ Learn about ACEs:

[www.cestoohigh.com](http://www.cestoohigh.com) or

[www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention](http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention)



Patti Hogan

“her kids,” young people who got to know her through an innovative program she began as a win/win: At-risk youth would get an allowance in exchange for cleaning up abandoned or unkept areas of Price Hill.

“I found that the kids who were getting into trouble were the pawns of adults,” she said. “They wanted money and it was the only way they could get it.”

Her program, in collaboration with the Hamilton County Juvenile Court and the safety council of the Price Hill Community Action Team, does more than give an allowance for the sweaty summertime work. It stimulates pride in the neighborhood, teaches young people about work skills like being on time and communicating well, and even rewards them with “business lunches” at local restaurants where they are encouraged to put away their phones and “really talk” with Hogan and her fellow volunteers, who serve as role models.

“I’ve really seen the seeds have started to sprout,” Hogan said. “I ran into two of them and they were so excited to be working, to have ‘real’ jobs now.”

Hogan has learned to look far beyond what she thinks she saw on those street corners. “It breaks my heart that some of these kids have gone through what they have gone through,” she said. “This is not just about cutting grass. It’s given me hope in the future.”

## Mimi Dyer

Tromping through Mount Airy Forest, Mimi Dyer was fascinated by the three children tagging along. They had never been in the woods, never gotten their sneakers dirty. But the siblings – ages 5, 7 and 9 – were fascinated by her.

“I feel sorry for you,” said the oldest. “You have to work on a Saturday.”

“No,” Mimi said. “I get to do this as a volunteer.”

The girl was shocked, knowing since they were removed from their mother that all the caseworkers and other officials who filled the children’s lives were paid. “Thank you,” she said simply.

Dyer, who has been a ProKids CASA volunteer since 2008, still considers herself fortunate to not only get to do this work, but also to have had that quiet thank you.

“These children are so innocent,” Dyer said.



Mimi Dyer

“They have not done anything wrong.”

While Dyer has seen some of the abused and neglected children she serves act out in difficult ways, she knows it is because of what has happened in their young lives. And then, as their CASA volunteer, she can help make sure they get what they need to heal and to begin to thrive.

“And it’s not just the children,” she said. She thinks of the mother who still reaches out to her when the system overwhelms her and she just needs to know what to do. And an aunt who Dyer could support at a school meeting so they could make sure the child she’d agreed to raise got what he needed to be successful.

Developing those relationships, Dyer said, has shown her that it is the little things, the little moments that make a difference.

“From the moment I walked into ProKids ... I knew that these people were awesome,” Dyer said. “I’m just lucky to be able to do this.”



Mars Robinson

## Mars Robinson

Mars Robinson knows she is fortunate.

“I was raised by a (former) foster kid,” she said. “My mom was in an abusive foster home, too. I know that could have been passed on so easily. But I have a wonderful mom.”

But Robinson was haunted by what could have happened, and when she found out about ProKids she could not wait to become a CASA Volunteer.

“My mom didn’t have the support of anything like ProKids,” Robinson said. “I knew I had to give something back to my community because I had been so lucky.”

Over the past five years, Robinson said she has never looked back. “It sounds like so much responsibility. And it is. But you feel the rewards, not the weight,” she said.

Whether she’s been working or completing her degree at the University of Cincinnati, Robinson said she’s been able to find the time “to make a kid’s life better.”

She said that’s because of the people from ProKids that she works alongside. “Everyone is looking out for our kids,” she said. “They are always right there with you and that changes everything when it gets dark or difficult. You get all the support you need.”

ProKids volunteers start out with a Snapshot presentation to learn more about the role. After this hour-long presentation online, they participate in a series of classes (now offered online) to learn about the child protection

system. Participants go at their own pace and also participate in a background check and an interview.

“From when you get a case to when it is resolved, every moment with every child has been a reward,” Robinson said.

## Karen Bankston

A nurse with a Ph.D. behind her name, Karen Bankston never forgets where it all started: growing up in a home where no one knew how to say “I love you.”

While she knows she represents beating the odds, Bankston has devoted time over the years to advocating for the kind of child she knows she once was.

“One of the things that is so important to me is taking the opportunity to understand what a child faces in confronting trauma,” Bankston said, adding that is why she has been a board member for Best Point (formerly The Children’s Home) over the last decade.

Best Point offers specialized services, such as for autism, as well as parenting classes, children’s therapy, educational programs and a visitation center to help parents reunite with their children after they are removed for abuse or neglect.

For these children, Bankston knows, “it is about more than being hit. It is about how they perceive themselves.”

This perception can reach back generations, as Bankston knows from her own life.

“We have to help them come up with strategies,” Bankston said, to heal and to build resilience. “There are gaps for these kids and their families that get in the way of living their best lives. We can help in breaking that cycle.” ■



All photos of children accompanying this article are stock images courtesy of ProKids.