

# The Oregonian

## Putting children at the center of the solution

by Steve Duin, The Oregonian  
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Jody Stahancyk has handled enough high-conflict divorces over the years to know how low people sometimes go in the name of repudiation and revenge.

"Divorce," the Portland lawyer says, "causes parents to go back to the emotional age of high school. We're right back to where you're hitting your fist against the locker. We're right back to hating him because he didn't take you to the prom. Divorce is a terrible assault on the emotions. More often than not, the children take the worst hit."

Because those children rarely have the security and counsel of an attorney, Stahancyk and Multnomah County Circuit Judge Susan Svetkey have designed and developed Child Centered Solutions, a nonprofit that will advocate for children when divorces take that predictable turn toward ugly. While Stahancyk invariably is one of the attorneys of record when the city's elite couples come undone, the divorces at issue here aren't of the Ron Perelman-Ellen Barkin variety. Pre-nups and \$20 million settlements aren't in play.

"In a tremendous proportion of cases that come into the court, there are no lawyers involved on behalf of the parents," Svetkey said. "A significant number of those cases involve mental illness, drug abuse, domestic violence or a level of conflict between the parents that kids get caught in the middle of."

"When the parties in the divorce don't have much to begin with, and they've soured on their soulmates, the drama and the stakes of the custody fight escalate rapidly."

"It's really seductive when the child is on your side," Stahancyk said. "Sometimes the parent that's least able to meet the needs of the child is the most aggressive."

Judges, unfortunately, rarely have the time or resources to evaluate which parent wants to protect the child and which would use the kid as a baseball bat or a bargaining chip.

In Multnomah County, Svetkey is assisted by a platoon of pro-bono lawyers, to whom she's assigned 53 cases since January. But while these attorneys have a heart for children and public service, they don't always have sufficient training in analyzing the best-case scenario for the kids.

What is the court to do when mom has custody of the two girls and dad reports that her new boyfriend is a convicted sex offender? Where can a child find sanctuary when mom's

accusing dad of domestic violence and dad's accusing mom of sex abuse and mental-health problems?

Enter Child-Centered Solutions and Leslie Abraham, the nonprofit's executive director and its first program attorney. A former deputy district attorney, Abraham spent 14 years out at juvenile court. "I did the termination-of-parental-rights cases. I got to know the judicial officers in Multnomah County and the bar," she said. "What I saw was that kids were adequately represented in the juvenile arena, but that didn't carry over into the family-law arena.

"There was, in other words, no CASA -- court-appointed special advocate -- for the children suffering through high-conflict divorce cases.

There is now.

Stahancyk heads the Child Centered Solutions board, which also includes Charlene Sabin, a behavioral pediatrician, and Peter Hamilton, former principal at Lincoln High School. The organization wants to assist all the players in the arena, educating the lawyers who are afraid of their clients, the judges who just want everyone to "play nice," and the school counselors who fail to recognize custody disasters.

Abraham accepted her first client from Svetkey last week; she believes she can handle three each month. "Obviously, the goal is to expand," Abraham said. "Get other lawyers on board. Make this statewide. The need is much greater than what's available.

" Part of her role, Abraham added, "will be to act as mediator, sitting down with the parents and focusing on what's best for the child. What's the plan that keeps us out of the courtroom?"

It's not so much a threat, she added, as it is a well-intentioned reminder that no one is served by a no-holds-barred battle, especially the children who've been forced to watch the most important relationship in their lives come apart at the seams.