

On Behalf of Children

The Law School's Children's Justice Project celebrates five years of working for the rights of children in the legal system.

All three founders of the UW Law School's flourishing Children's Justice Project (CJP) remember the fall day in 2001 when they had their first conversation. Sarah Helvey, Hannah Renfro, and Notesong Srisopark Thompson were newly-arrived first-year students who came to law school already focused on the field of children's rights.

"We attended a lecture at the Law School by a leading child advocate," says Thompson. "After the talk, the three of

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— Notesong Srisopark Thompson

us just gravitated toward one another and introduced ourselves and discovered our common interest in child advocacy."

Each of the three had a different focus: Helvey (profiled in the *Gargoyle's* Student Life section in Summer 2004) was pursuing a dual degree in education and law, committed to advocating for children's rights and shaping education policy.

Renfro aspired to work in legal and political arenas to advocate for children in the juvenile justice system.

Thompson had been a pediatric nurse with experience in emergency room and trauma cases, who had cared for abused and neglected children. "Sometimes I would see the same children come through the doors of the ER for suspected abuse over and over again," Thompson says. "I always thought, 'How can I prevent this child from being harmed again? What laws are in place to protect these kids?' That's when I decided to go to law school."

Renfro says of their first conversation, "We agreed that we wanted to impress upon other students and faculty the importance of children's law and emphasize that it is not family law — it's a different field. So that's how we got hooked up: expressing to each other our passion for children's law and frustration that it wasn't more recognized."

They went on to create the Children's Justice Project, whose aims are to promote the interests of children, help students pursue careers in children's law, and provide networking opportunities with professionals in the field.

"One early morning in the winter of 2001," recalls Thompson, "we met at a coffeehouse on State Street, put our heads together and wrote down all of our

hopes and dreams for a children's advocacy group: short-term and long-term goals."

They found a supportive faculty adviser in Professor Gretchen Viney, Associate Director of the Lawyering Skills Program, who brought her expertise as a guardian ad litem. "She said 'yes' right away," Thompson recalls, "and she has given us thoughtful and very helpful advice throughout the years."

Early Encouragement

Renfro names three early milestones that had great significance for the fledgling group. First on her list was encouragement from the Law School. "We went to Dean Davis in the spring of 2002 and told him we wanted to create this group and do this work. We said we wanted to go to the



Founders of the Children's Justice Project celebrate their Law School graduation in May 2004. From left, Sarah Helvey, Notesong Srisopark Thompson, and Hannah Renfro.

ABA “Children in the Law” conference in Washington, D.C., and he funded the three of us. That was really symbolic: the commitment to get this started.

“Then, in 2003 we received a completely unsolicited award of \$3,000 from the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers. A number of us had been nominated for their Leonard Loeb Award for family law and they were really excited when they learned about our work. So in addition to giving the individual award that year [Renfro herself was the winner], they decided to make a special award to our organization.”

The third milestone was when alumnus Clark Smith ’65 decided that funds from his endowment should be used to help fund CJP’s summer program. “That was really a defining moment,” Renfro says. “This summer work is so integral to what we do. We’ve placed students in Boston, Chicago, Washington, D.C., all over Wisconsin. They’re doing policy and juvenile defense work, representing kids who have been abused and neglected — even perhaps saving kids’ lives.”

CJP has now awarded almost \$40,000 in fellowships to students who have done summer work for 13 organizations around the country. Smith’s contribution has been augmented by gifts from other private donors. In 2005, the fellowship program was named the Marygold Melli CJP Summer Fellowship Program, in honor of Professor Emerita Melli, who has become a valued adviser to the group.

“Professor Melli is a pioneer in children’s law in the state of Wisconsin and a beloved mentor to CJP members and alumni,” says CJP’s current president, Sara Vanden Brook 3L.

CJP has an active advisory board of leading child advocates, including juvenile public defenders, guardians ad litem, attorneys in private practice, and professors. “We’re honored to have them on our board,” says Thompson. “Their opinions are like gold.”

Two Major Conferences

Since its inception, CJP has sponsored lunch talks by practicing attorneys who speak on emerging issues concerning children and the law. In 2007, the group went

on to hold its first all-day Faces of Advocacy Conference, bringing in leading experts to focus on the theme “Brain Development and Child Advocacy.” More than 50 students and professionals attended the sessions.

The second annual conference, on March 28, 2008, “Education, Kids, and the Law,” was held at the UW-Madison Memorial Union. “We’ve outgrown the accommodations available in the Law School,” says CJP Vice President Katie Holtz 3L.

The Work Continues

In 2007–08, CJP is celebrating its fifth anniversary, taking pride not only in its growing number of professional and volunteer projects, but also in the achievements of CJP alumni who are working on various fronts to improve the lives of children.

The three founders have gone on to diverse careers, all closely linked to children’s law:

- Sarah Helvey ’04 is an attorney with the Nebraska Appleseed Center for Law in the Public Interest in Lincoln, focusing on child welfare policy and impact litigation.
- Hannah Renfro ’04 is an associate in the Litigation Practice Group of Godfrey & Kahn in Madison, focusing on intellectual property litigation and antitrust law. She takes numerous pro bono cases representing children.
- Notesong Srisopark Thompson ’04 is a pediatric nurse at Children’s Hospital of Wisconsin Emergency Department/Trauma Center in Milwaukee, adjunct professor at Marquette University Law School, and Associate Director of Marquette’s Milwaukee Street Law Project.

Other CJP alumni who are making a difference include:



The Children’s Justice Project 2003–04 Executive Board pauses for a photo at a summer planning meeting.

- Janel George ’04: Staff Attorney, The Children’s Law Center, Washington, D.C.
- Lori Hickman ’05: Attorney, DeWitt, Ross & Stevens, practicing family law and estate planning
- Eileen Huie ’05, M.S.W. ’05: Assistant State Public Defender, Milwaukee County Juvenile Division
- Nidhi Kashyap ’07: Attorney, Friends of Abused Families, Inc., West Bend, Wisconsin
- Cecelia Klingele ’05: U.S. Supreme Court Clerk for Justice John Paul Stevens
- Joel Plant ’06: Madison Mayor Dave Cieslewicz’s point person for Public Safety and Neighborhood Sustainability
- Benjamin Winig ’04: Attorney, McDonough Holland & Allen PC, Oakland, California, practicing public agency law and pro bono work

A Winning Combination

As current CJP students and alumni geared up for the March conference, faculty advisor Gretchen Viney looked back on the winning combination of factors that contributed to CJP’s success story.

“CJP was the vision of a very determined group of young women,” Viney says. “They had the energy to start a new organization and the foresight to plan for its continued vitality after they graduated. CJP’s success is a tribute to its founders and to the dedicated students who have succeeded them.” ■