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[Issues>> Child Abuse]



Young at Heart

The Family & Children's Place's Child Advocacy Center works to be in tune with the youngsters whose lives it restores.

>>By **Katie Brown**
Photos by John Nation

The room is sparsely furnished, with few distractions or indications of exactly what takes place there, but with enough bright decor and bold primary colors to give it a child-friendly warmth. Two comfortable, big blue chairs, which therapist and forensic interviewer Kim Cook describes as “squishy,” await the day’s occupants and face each other, a carpet showcasing a grinning green frog between them. Tabletops swing up when a child may need to draw something or point to a picture. Smaller and less noticeable, but equally important, are the microphone and video camera hanging from the ceiling. This is the interview room where the road to recovery begins for many child victims of sexual or other types of abuse.

The room is in the Child Advocacy Center (CAC), which is part of Family & Children's

Place, a local nonprofit concerned with stopping and preventing child abuse. Children who are believed to be victims of abuse, from infancy to age 18, can come to the center, which annually sees between 850 and 1,000 children, the majority of whom have been sexually abused and are referred through Child Protective Services or law enforcement. The average age of the children, who come from various backgrounds, is nine. “Sexual abuse knows no socioeconomic barriers,” says Pam Helms, the organization’s operations executive. At the Louisville CAC, one of 15 in Kentucky, children need to tell their story once and only once because the unobtrusive camera and microphone record interviews while a detective and Child Protective Services worker watch in another room. If necessary, this video can serve in court as testimony. “There comes

a point," Helms says, "where they just don't want to talk about it anymore."

Before the forensic interview even begins, Cook tries to put the child at ease. "Hey," she'll say, "you're here to talk to me today!" Walking down the hallway, she'll point to pictures from the movies *Toy Story* or *The Little Mermaid*, which decorate the walls. Once inside one of two interview rooms, she lets the child sit in one of the blue chairs or at a little table. "Wherever they want," Cook says. "I want to give them as much control as possible." She allows the child to work in a coloring book or mold Play-Doh as she asks questions: *Where do you go to school? Who do you live with? Are there any places people aren't supposed to touch? Do you know anybody that has happened to?* If necessary, she pulls out anatomical drawings. "I'm always reassuring them that they're not in trouble," Cook says, "and always telling them that Mom or Dad can't hear us in this room."

One young girl we'll call April (Family & Children's Place won't release the names of clients) came to the CAC about three months ago. Her parents were struggling financially and had to have some of their seven children move in with various family members. April and a brother and sister went to live with their grandfather. April often visited a neighbor's house to play with two girls her age, and the mother of the two girls had a boyfriend. He started molesting April, several times over the course of a year. April told her mother, and after law enforcement and Child Protective Services got involved, April made it to the CAC.

"She didn't want to say anything because the two little girls that were living in the home with this man, the sexual abuse was also happening to them," Cook says. "We've since seen all three of the girls." April still comes in for a support group, and Cook says she is doing well, evidenced by how she talks more openly about things now compared to the first time she came into the CAC.

Once children have participated in a fact-finding interview, they head to a medical exam with Dr. Lisa Pfitzer, the CAC's lead physician and part of the University of Louisville School of Medicine's pediatric forensic department. Mom or Dad can come along, as long as they are not the accused abuser.

The room is as warm as an exam room can be, with stuffed animals and blankets among the examination table, camera, laptop and other equipment. For comfort and a sense of security, each child gets a blanket and stuffed animal that he or she may carry throughout the exam and keep once it is over. A youngster will hold up a new blue bunny to the camera, which the doctor uses to examine "fingers, piggy toes, anything sort of silly to try and put the kids at ease." She will snap a few photos, though there is not always visual evidence of

mistreatment. "Most children who clearly disclose sexual abuse have normal (physical) exams, and this has been supported in research literature over the years," Pfitzer says.

Many children may not need to heal physically, but that's where mental-health services and counseling come into play, another step in the recovery process.

Family & Children's Place, which is headquartered off River Road and operates four sites (Shively, St. Matthews, West End, New Albany) in addition to the downtown CAC, serves about 3,500 families per year in seven Kentucky and five Southern Indiana counties. About 50 percent of those cases are for non-sexual physical abuse, the other half for sexual abuse. The organization's 125 staff members and 150 volunteers wear a variety of hats, often acting as case managers or Child Protective Services workers. The staff also collaborates with the Louisville Metro Police Department's crimes-against-children unit.

The agency is funded annually through state and federal grants, private donations and Metro United Way, the single largest source of support with \$1.5 million given annually. Maggie Elder, Metro United Way's vice president of community impact, says of Family & Children's Place, "Their Child Advocacy Center is the only one in town. With some of the approaches they take, they're the main one doing this work."

Family & Children's Place and its board members have come up with a comprehensive campaign to raise \$11.3 million by June 2012, which includes endowment funding and will meet the needs of an annual \$4.3 million operating budget through 2012. With a \$2 million gift from Kosair Charities and another \$1 million from the Brown Foundation, among others, the organization has already reached about 50 percent of the goal.

The \$6 million already secured is destined for a new CAC site to be located on Kentucky and Fifth streets, away from the racket of the current Chestnut and Fourth site, whose location is less than ideal, with its entrance off the alleyway that runs behind the Seelbach Hotel and empties onto Chestnut. The facility will be a national model as a "co-located" center, meaning all of the nonprofit's community partners will have offices located on-site. "They are forward-thinking in their services for children," says Terry Brooks, who works with the policy group Kentucky Youth Advocates. Child Protective Services workers, detectives and the commonwealth's attorney will all have desk space, making the experience for children even more streamlined and less traumatic.

Dan Fox, the president of Family & Children's Place, says, "There are a handful set up like this across the nation. It's what people aspire to." He says that the closest one to Louisville is

in Chicago. Adds Helms: "Kentucky is one of the leading states in setting up CACs. Kentucky has set up a series of CACs so the entire state is covered." In 1990, Helms says, the state legislature mandated that a CAC be installed in every region of Kentucky so "every child in every county would have access."

Fox notes that without healing and recovery, childhood victims may suffer chronically in many areas of their adult lives. "The story," Fox says, "is a life of oftentimes failed careers, failed marriages, broken relationships and some pretty significant mental-health issues from carrying this secret and this guilt with them." LeAnn Magre, a child welfare coordinator with Family & Children's Place, remembers an adopted girl we'll call Bonnie, who was in her late teens and eventually made it to the CAC. Magre had originally gotten involved with Bonnie to prevent the adoption from falling apart. The adoptive family was frustrated with the girl because she had stolen a large sum of money from school and was hitting the younger children living in the home. She had been hospitalized several times for psychiatric reasons. Eventually, as Bonnie became more comfortable with Magre, she mentioned that she had been molested, something Magre had suspected earlier but Bonnie had denied. "It had happened 12 years earlier, and she held it in all this time," Magre says. "The way she was acting wasn't surprising for somebody who had kept this secret for so long."

Healing, Fox adds, can ripple to the societal level, where things are often better understood in dollar amounts. Nationally, says Brooks, the annual estimated costs associated with child abuse were about \$104 billion in 2007, according to the most recent data on the issue. "Child abuse leads to physical, psychological, behavioral and societal consequences," Brooks says. Adds Pfitzer: "Child abuse occurs not infrequently and is a significant, arguably preventative, burden on our healthcare system."

National statistics indicate that one in four girls and one in six boys will be sexually abused before adulthood. The subject's taboo nature often prevents discussion about how frequently abuse occurs as well as its far-reaching consequences. Prevent Child Abuse Kentucky's most recent statistics report that the number of children abused or neglected in the state rose from 84,451 in 2007 to 88,292 in 2008, an almost 5 percent increase. In Jefferson County, children victimized by abuse or neglect increased by 8 percent between 2003 and 2007.

Jim Grace, assistant director in the department for community-based services, part of the state's Cabinet for Health and Family Services, says that in 2010, 29 percent of sexual and physical abuse reports were substantiated in Kentucky, and there were 23 child fatalities related to abuse or neglect. "Risk factors in



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Kentucky encompass many issues," Grace says. "The most prevalent ones include substance abuse, domestic violence and mental-health issues."

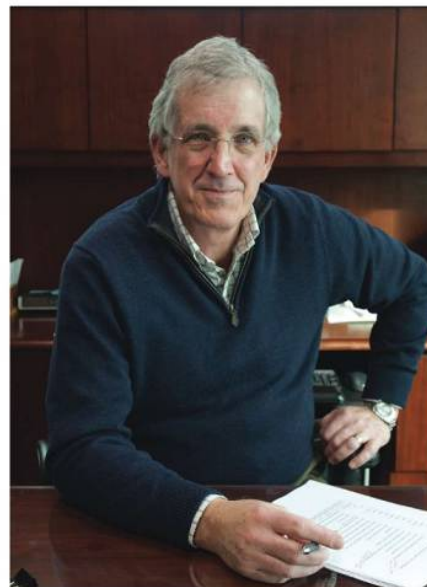
Says Brooks: "Unfortunately, poverty is the single best predictor of child abuse and neglect, due to the family stress often accompanying poverty." He adds that Kentucky's child poverty rate is more than 25 percent, which means about one-quarter of children in Kentucky live at or below the poverty line.

The 59-year-old Fox, a Chicago-area native who came to Louisville in February 1985 to become executive director of what was then known as the Family & Children's Agency, says the nonprofit is a "history of mergers." Most recently, in October 2008, Family and Children First, headed by Fox, merged with the Helms-led Family Place in the building that now houses the Child Advocacy Center. Fox says he envisions expanding community education and prevention programs, to get residents behind the idea that abuse does not belong in our families or neighborhoods. He wants to break the cycle of abuse on a societal, not just a personal, level. "Parents don't grow up wanting to abuse their kids," Fox says. "But we know how to prevent abuse, we know how to stop it and we know how to help kids begin to heal."

For example, sometimes children who are exposed to violence and abuse, or are simply living in an at-risk situation, will act out at an early age. Some get kicked out of pre-school or day care. One of the organization's programs, for children up to five years old, teaches them to draw and express themselves creatively, plant gardens or work at a wood bench with real hammers and nails. At a small table, they sit in seats marked by their photos and serve themselves family-style meals, such as bowls of spaghetti and lots of fruits and veggies. They experiment with new foods they might not try at home, such as hummus, although quite a few noses turn up at that. Afterward, they pick up their dishes and carry them to a low sink, where they wash them and put them away.

The nonprofit also helps homeless families that need to find stable housing or learn how to prioritize their children's education. One program is at Hazelwood Middle School in Southern Indiana and will soon come to Meyzeek Middle School in Louisville. "You're a parent struggling, and maybe you're working two jobs. Sometimes it's very difficult to prioritize your child's education. Getting them to school every day may be difficult enough," Helms says. "So we really want to help the children value and begin to improve their academic performance, but we're also helping the parent to begin to value that progress as well."

Another program worth mentioning is for



"There are a handful (of agencies) set up like this one across the nation," says Dan Fox (above). "It's what people aspire to."

young or at-risk first-time parents. It involves an in-home visitation from a staff member to help the parents learn appropriate child development. The idea is that if parents understand their infant's behavior and developmental processes, they will be less likely to resort to abuse because of frustration. "A lot of the people we've seen," Magre says, "are living life and having success."

Fox remembers one former client who wrote a play about how she had been sexually abused. He says she went on to a "prestigious college." Joe Carlton, who supervises the Shively site of Family & Children's Place, recalls recently getting in touch with a former client. Her father had abused her, and her mother refused to believe it for a long time. "The mother had a wall up because of everything she was going to lose," Carlton says. "She was upset because she had chosen to be with somebody capable of doing this." The mother eventually apologized to her daughter, who is now going to a Kentucky college. "Things are good for them now," Carlton says.

"There are a lot of perceptions out there that sexual abuse is a death sentence for kids. It's really not," Carlton adds. "I always think of it like having a scar. They're always going to be able to look down and see a wound, but that doesn't mean they can't heal from it if they get the proper help and support."

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