

May 24, 2011

Almost ten years ago, several of us thought that there needed to be a statewide legal advocacy organization focused on at-risk children, especially children in foster care. We thought that if we combined our individual efforts, prioritized our efforts, and fought united battles, we could make a difference. We also thought that we could help give these children a voice in their own dependency case and also in shaping Florida's child welfare system.

Today, Florida's Children First (FCF) has grown into an active Board of Directors twenty-six members strong, an Advisory Board of fifty, and committees with hundreds of members in local communities that are all dedicated to protecting the legal rights of children. We went from an all volunteer effort to a professional staff with two of the state's best children's rights attorneys – our Executive Director, Christina L. Spudeas and Deputy Director, Robin L. Rosenberg and Lindsay Baach, Youth Coordinator for Florida Youth SHINE, and support staff that includes Debby Beck, Development Coordinator and Tiffany McDonough, Administrative Assistant.

We have also helped to give birth to Florida Youth Shine, a group of current and former foster children who have organized local chapters and who communicate their recommendations for systemic change to Florida Department of Children & Family Services and the Florida Legislature. In 2009, Lindsay Baach came on board to lead the Florida Youth Shine (FYS) program. In the last two years she has organized FYS and increased chapters and membership of youth from Miami to Pensacola teaching leadership skills and articulating the very important issues involving FYS.

We at FCF are proud of our Legislative accomplishments for systemic change including; creating interagency cooperation between Department of Children and Families (DCF) and the Department of Education (DOE) and shared responsibility for each child's success, removing barriers to school enrollment for foster children placed in new schools and providing foster youth with access to their own records.....which contain their own life story. FCF worked to establish the Children and Youth Cabinet, to protect Road to Independence funding, and are routinely called upon as a resource to educate legislators in the public policy arena. Every year during the legislative session, members of Florida Youth SHINE walk the halls of the state capitol to educate legislators on problems in the child welfare system and to put a face on issues affecting children in care.

We at FCF are especially proud of the publications we have been able to put forth. (see our Resource guide) Additionally, training lawyers throughout Florida and providing technical assistance to DCF for improvements to the quality child welfare system are among our highest priorities.

Finally, our highest priority is to give each child in the dependency system a quality advocate to help navigate the child through their own dependency case whether a

Guardian ad Litem or an attorney, which includes protecting the funding of the GAL Program.

All of our work would not be possible were it not for our grants, sponsors and supporters. Much of the work we do is through passionate volunteers who assist with pro bono legal representation and who raise funds to help FCF keep making a difference. The Florida Bar Foundation has been extraordinarily supportive and has helped us grow by making us their largest Children's Legal Services grantee. Our sponsors, including our Statewide Sponsor, Colodny, Fass, Talenfeld, Karlinsky and Abate, P.A., generously contribute to our ability to effect policy changes and make lives better for children in care. Finally, we have hundreds of supporters that give in small amounts, with every dollar donated helping children in need. Together, we have made a difference and look forward to doing even more in the future.

Thank you,

Howard M. Talenfeld, Esq.

Colodny, Fass, Talenfeld, Karlinsky & Abate, P.A.