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The place where kids truly come first

Kids First Law Center expands with new Des Moines office

By Melissa Higgins, Communications Director



Attorney Molly McPartland and Office Manager Layne Huey pose at the Kids First Law Center office in Cedar Rapids, which is adorned with kid-friendly décor.

There is no question what the mission of the Kids First Law Center is; the name gives it away. It's a place where kids come first, always. So instead of stuffy leather chairs and polished shelves with legal books, Kids First greets its clients with toys, games, colorful artwork and a giant stuffed giraffe. It's a playful vibe that carries through the entire Cedar Rapids office, a bright and happy place where often dark and painful situations are playing out.

Kids First is a law firm that gives children a voice in divorce, custody and other conflicts by providing focused legal representation. In addition to child representation, the firm holds divorce workshops, offers a joint parenting mediation program, assists in neutral custody exchanges, and has recently launched a new restorative justice project which facilitates conflict resolution in the Cedar Rapids school district.

"The heart of what we do is conflict resolution," explained Jenny Schulz, who founded the firm in 2005.

Schulz had an early vision to create the first law firm in the country that focused exclusively on representing children in divorce. Since then, her Cedar Rapids office has grown to nine employees, all the while expanding

its program offerings based on needs in that community. Now, the need is taking them into Polk County with a brand-new office location in Des Moines. Two attorneys and an office manager will staff it, with the idea of offering a similar slate of community-centered programs in the heart of Central Iowa.

The overall goals for Kids First are to create stability for children of divorce, lessen the effect of family conflict on children, connect families to support systems and needed resources and make children's voices heard. It's a non-profit endeavor, funded primarily by individual donations and grants. Although Kids First attorneys are court-appointed, no state or federal funding is provided. Children receive free representation when their families meet income guidelines. For higher income families, Kids First provides services on a sliding fee scale.

"Divorce is something that impacts people across all backgrounds and income levels, so we're reaching kids across all types of families (with the sliding scale)," said Molly McPartland, one of the new attorneys hired to staff the Des Moines office. She completed three years of judicial clerking after law school and calls



The staff of the Cedar Rapids office gathers for a meeting. Executive Director Jenny Schulz is seated on the left.



Supporters of Kids First gather for a launch party to celebrate the new office in Des Moines. They are accepting donations and seeking volunteers in the Des Moines area. Left: Pictured at the welcome table of the launch party is two Kids First Cedar Rapids' attorneys: Ari Crum and Elizabeth Weyer, along with Judge Sean McPartland from the Sixth District

working for Kids First a “dream job.” McPartland is from Cedar Rapids and had met with Schulz before she went to law school to seek career advice.

“Then I remember I was in Des Moines for a year, clerking, and having lunch with somebody, and I said, ‘Wouldn’t it be so awesome if Kids First opened a Des Moines office?’ And it all came to fruition.”

She couldn’t be more pleased with the opportunity: “I’m excited to be part of this. It’s an exciting resource to bring to Des Moines.”

Another attorney, Cole Mayer, was hired even more recently to join McPartland in the Des Moines office. He comes from a private practice background. And rounding out the Des Moines staff is Layne Huey, who will serve as the office manager and workshop coordinator. Huey used to volunteer with Kids First when she lived in Cedar Rapids, and was thrilled to serve on the Visionary Committee which helped launch the Des Moines initiative. For Schulz, Huey was an obvious choice to bring on staff.

“Kids First is very mission-driven,” said Huey. “We find people who genuinely believe in the mission and go forth with sort of this selfless endeavor. We are still very unique in that we’re doing these things, completely focused on the kids.”

Their new office is in the Synergy Center, in the former AIB campus in Des Moines. A collection of non-profits are housed there with subsidized rent, a sort of “non-profit incubator” which is part of an initiative through the Telligen Community Initiative.

“The campus is designed to have a public health focus, where non-profits can have office space that isn’t cumbersome to their bottom line, and it is also a great place for networking and collaboration,” said Huey.

It was Polk County judges who got the ball rolling on this new Kids First location. They had heard what Schulz and her team were doing in Cedar Rapids and wanted to try to replicate it. The Visionary Committee was born, and began drumming up support and

fundraising cash.

The judges, who are the ones who appoint cases to Kids First attorneys, are on board for good reason, explained Schulz.

“It does relieve the burden and workload on the judiciary,” she said. “In Linn County, we have settled 84 percent of these high-conflict cases without having to go to trial. Without a child’s representative, only 15 percent of high-conflict cases settle.”

Each attorney on staff carries a caseload of about 40 to 50 children at a time. And while they work on the legal issues, they also help support the family in other ways. The entire staff is mission focused, with a belief that children are often underestimated.

“To be able to give them a voice is really powerful,” said Huey. “(Divorce) affects kids, and a lot of people don’t realize how much.”

Schulz says the success they have in working with these kids becomes quite evident, especially as they get older.

“I run into people now who say, ‘You may not remember me, but you really helped my family.’ That’s at the heart of why I started this,” said Schulz. “It’s never been about the numbers of how many kids we can help, because you’re not going to change a complicated family situation overnight. But with a lot of time and devotion to one family, you can help that child have a much different future and have his or her own successful relationships as an adult.”



Molly McPartland and Layne Huey sit in the client waiting room at the Kids First office in Cedar Rapids. This is also the room where neutral custody exchanges occur.



The artwork of some of the firm’s child clients hangs on the wall.

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