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CHILD ADVOCATE COMBINES PASSION WITH TECHNIQUE

*Head of Public Counsel's Juvenile
Program
Helps Community's Neediest*



Anytime there's a meeting that has to do with kids under the jurisdiction of the Juvenile Court, she's generally there.

And when Virginia G. "Jenny" Weisz speaks in that honeydew Southern drawl of hers, people turn to listen.

"I am just so impressed by the depth of her knowledge of every aspect of the child welfare system and even more impressed by her commitment to working for the betterment of children everywhere," said Los Angeles Juvenile Court Presiding Judge Michael Nash.

"She is an extremely knowledgeable and strong advocate," said Patricia Curry, chair of the Los Angeles County Commission on Children and Families. "The kids need her in this county; they desperately need her."

"I think she's a very effective advocate for children," added Nancy Shea, senior attorney at Mental Health Advocacy Services Inc., a nonprofit law firm. "She has a level of energy and commitment that's wonderful."

Weisz, 53, comes across in public forums like the smart and understated law professor that she is, but the directing attorney for children's rights at Public Counsel might be more appropriately viewed as a scrapper.

"One thing about Jenny is that when she makes a representation that she's going to do something, you can take it to the bank," said Jo Kaplan, a Juvenile Court referee and the president of the Los Angeles Chapter of the National Association of Council for Children. "She's credible, neutral, brilliant and as tough as can be. And when she knows she's right, she digs her feet in."

Others agree. "She's outspoken, but she's got that wonderful Southern way about her," said attorney-activist Linda Pate of Pate & Pate. "She is a soldier, a warrior, and she's an inspiration to me."

The road to this warrior's destiny was paved with righteous brimstones.

Born in Charlottesville, VA, Weisz moved with her family to Louisville, KY, when she was 4. As one of six children born to Allen Graves, a Baptist minister, and Helen Graves, a homemaker and writer, Weisz was inoculated early with a strong sense of social justice.

Allen Graves, who died in 1992, was very involved in the civil rights movement as was Helen, whom Weisz described as "very articulate and vocal."

It had an effect on my life," she said. "My father was on the human rights commission for the city and invited Martin Luther King to come and talk. He got a lot of flak for it."

By the time Weisz left home for Blue Mountain College in Mississippi, she was entrenched in the civil rights movement, getting into what she described as one scrape after another. She met her future husband, John Weisz, another idealist, in the heat of the battle. "We have a nice little partnership," she said.

After they married, the couple joined the Peace Corps and were sent to Kenya, where she taught school. When they returned, John Weisz entered Yale for a Ph.D. in psychology. Later, he was offered a teaching post at Cornell University in Ithaca, N.Y., which gave his wife an opportunity to attend law school there. By then, the couple had two small children, Dawn and Alli, and Weisz managed to juggle studying and homemaking chores.

The law made sense to her because it was a way to focus attention and shape public policy. "I learned during the civil rights movement that children were the most vulnerable people in our society and needed someone to represent them," she said.

After her 1978 graduation from Cornell, the young family moved to Chapel Hill, N.C., where Weisz became the first director of the North Carolina Office of Guardian Ad Litem. While there, she organized a child advocate — or CASA — program so that each child in the state had an attorney and a CASA.

After a dozen years in Chapel Hill and the completion of Weisz's first book, "Children and the Law in North Carolina," she and her family moved to Southern California, where her husband had been offered a psychology professorship at UCLA. At the same time, their youngest daughter was accepted at Pomona College.

Once here, Weisz took a job as a visiting professor at UCLA and taught interdisciplinary courses in juvenile and mental health law. In addition, she wrote a textbook called, "Children and Adolescents in Need: A Legal Primer for the Helping Professional."

"I wrote it for professionals who work with children and adolescents who need to know what the law requires of them," she said.

Weisz has continued to teach at UCLA, as well as at the USC Law Center.

In 1992, Weisz was hired by Public Counsel, the nation's largest *pro bono* law firm, to direct staff and volunteer attorneys specializing in juvenile law. "What I found here is there were a whole lot of civil and legal issues that required strong advocacy, and there were attorneys in dependency court who needed more help," she said.

Dan Grunfeld, president and CEO of Public Counsel, said Weisz possesses the unique ability to be both passionate about her mission and technically expert.

"That's really a rare combination. There are often people who are very passionate or technical, but to have both is unusual," he said. "Jenny is wonderful. She's a wonderful asset to Public Counsel and a wonderful gift to the community."

Nash said that Weisz is "truly an intellectual" in the field of child welfare and "truly one who matches that intellectual ability with action. It is a pleasure for me to work with her. She's a real asset."

Among other things, Weisz is credited with broadening the focus of Public Counsel's practice, which now includes representing children whose families are affected by AIDS, expanding the representation of pregnant and parenting teens, extending legal guardianship services to family members, and helping to found one of the most lauded foster child adoption programs in the nation. A recent book, "Legal Issues for Pregnant & Parenting Teens in California," was co-written and co-edited by Weisz and her staff at Public Counsel.

Last year, Public Counsel joined with three other advocacy groups in a successful class action against the state and LA County on behalf of children with mental health problems who need specialized services. *Emily Q. v. Belshe*, 98-4181 (WDK).

Under her leadership, Public Counsel established a torts project using *pro bono* attorneys from major firms to handle lawsuits on behalf of kids harmed in foster care.

Since 1993, the torts project has recovered more than \$10 million for children who were abused while in foster care or injured in an accident.

"The torts cases are very troubling because they involve children who have already been removed from the places where they were living — and then they are hurt in foster care," she said. "Some of these children are in vegetative states or in psychiatric hospitals and have horrible memories because of what was done to them."

But the child advocate said that she has now reached a place in her life where she must prioritize the tasks she chooses to work on. At present, she is focused on special education; kids tottering between the dependency, delinquency and mental health court systems; and emancipation services for teens.

"This is the kind of work where you have to feel good about what you do. You can get drained because of the terrible things that have been done to kids," she said. "You have to focus on what can be done with intervention — not on what's been done to them in the past."

Over the years, she admits, there have been cases that have both taken a toll and inspired her. One such case was a child dying of cancer whose only hope was a bone marrow transplant. "The only match was his father (who lived in Mexico), so we got the father a visa to come here to do the bone marrow transplant," she said. "The boy lived a little longer."

Inspiration comes from the "angel cases" — situations in which someone steps forward to save a child's life. One of these involved an impoverished woman whose sister had died of AIDS, leaving behind a severely handicapped and disfigured 2-year-old. "He had the spirit of just the sweetest little kid," Weisz recalled. The aunt came to Public Counsel after her landlord tried to force her to move and because she needed to secure a legal guardianship for the boy. "She could have put him in foster care," said Weisz. "But she said 'no.'"

In 1994, the Weiszes, whose two children had reached adulthood, decided they were not quite finished raising kids. They opened their hearts and home to two children they had met at a homeless shelter — and the adoptions of siblings Danny, now 7, and Tammy, 11 were finalized last year. The beaming mother said that her experience has helped her assist other parents considering adoption.

"I'm an adoptive parent, so I feel very good about it. But it's difficult at times to get things ironed out (in the adoption process)," she said. "Ideally, it should take a few months. But it's not like that now."

The child advocate, law professor, author, Boy Scout den leader and counselor at a summer camp for families with AIDS said at the end of the day it's her children who are the most important people in her life:

"They mean more to me than anything. And you can stop the story right there."