

Cover Story

In defense of the children

The Montgomery Child Advocacy Project steps forward when youngsters need a legal advocate.

By Erica S. Brath
FOR THE INQUIRER

Ten years ago, young victims of abuse and neglect in Montgomery County had no advocate in the legal system.

"All the research has shown that, in order for a child to heal, the bad guy has to pay. Otherwise, the child doesn't think anything was wrong. So they have to go through this system, and it works. But they need someone by their side," said Mary Pugh, administrative director of the Montgomery Child Advocacy Project.

The Norristown nonprofit offers free legal representation to neglected and abused children. Founded in 2004, the project has more than 100 lawyers who volunteer their time and expertise.

"We may be a fledgling, but we are growing quickly," project founder and director Wendy Demchick-Alloy said.

Demchick-Alloy and Pugh recently won 2007 Difference Makers Awards from the Montgomery County Bar Association. The honor recognizes attorneys whose pro-bono work has made an impact.

Demchick-Alloy had worked in the district attorney's offices in Philadelphia and in Montgomery Counties for nearly two decades before a shocking encounter in 1997.

That day, Demchick-Alloy sat in on the trial of a man charged with molesting his 9-year-old stepdaughter, who was testifying against him.

"I see a woman sitting behind the defendant," Demchick-Alloy recalled. "The child gets off the stand, and stops in the middle



Protecting the legal rights of children is the purpose of the Montgomery Child Advocacy Project. Wendy Demchick-Alloy (left) is a founder of the agency; Mary C. Pugh (right) is its administrative director.

of the courtroom. It was an uncomfortable moment — everybody's sitting there, and she's looking around the courtroom. And I'm looking at this woman."

The woman was the child's mother.

"I don't know why I was sent there. Maybe I was heaven-sent — divine intervention caused me to be there that day," Demchick-Alloy said. "But from that day forward, I never wanted to see another child alone in a courtroom."

Soon after, she formed what was then called the Montgomery County Child Advocacy Project while at the district attorney's office, bringing in co-founders including Risa Vetri Ferman, district attorney-elect of Montgomery County, and Mark Steinberg, managing partner at the Lansdale law firm Rubin, Glickman, Steinberg & Gifford.

Steinberg, president of the project's board of directors, happened to have been the stepfather's attorney that day in 1997.

"I got involved because I was the villain who created the



The agency headed by Demchick-Alloy (left) and Pugh includes about 100 lawyers.

need," Steinberg said before pausing. "Well, not really created the need. I would say it was happenstance."

The project, which became an independent organization in

2004, is modeled on Philadelphia's Support Center for Child Advocates, which has provided legal and social services to children in the city for nearly three decades.

To date, lawyers with the project have represented 769 children, and in 2007, they helped 233 children navigate the legal system. Referrals come from across the county.

"Justices, district justices, I have a lot of referrals through the police department. We also get a lot from the caseworkers, as well as the staff of the district attorney's office," said Demchick-Alloy, who helps to match cases with the volunteer lawyers.

Those lawyers provide legal counsel to children who testify in court, and serve as guardians for children who need medical treatment and have no other adults on their side.

"I handled the very first case," Steinberg said. "An 11-year-old girl was living in a trailer with her mother and her mother's boyfriend. The mother and the boyfriend beat her and pulled her hair out, and

For Information

To learn more about the Montgomery Child Advocacy Project, or to volunteer, call 610-279-1219 or visit www.mcapkids.org.

ultimately, I was able ... to terminate the mother's and father's rights and get her adopted."

Lawyers with the project dedicate hours of pro-bono work to each case.

"When we're appointed, we're literally the child's guardian, and we make decisions in the best interest of the child," Steinberg said.

Organizations including the Montgomery County Bar Association and the Montgomery County Foundation have provided support, and the project was added to the Montgomery County budget last year. Yet grants and donations provide the bulk of its funding.

"We are looking to continue our growth, represent more children and expand the services we offer," Steinberg said. "We're hoping to hire our own social worker and staff attorney."

Toward that goal, the project will take over the Run For the Hill of It! annual road race and walk in July in Chestnut Hill. The event was founded in 1989 by the Friends of Erik — named after Erik Engwall, who died of cystic fibrosis — and past years' proceeds have gone to needy children.

"This year, the volunteers decided they were going to look for a change, and offered the race to a group," Pugh said. "We will be the race directors and the beneficiary this year."

Also, the project welcomes volunteers from the community; no law degree is required.

"I don't want anyone to think there's nothing for them to do," Pugh said. "Everybody has something, and if this is calling to them, they can find that great gift that they have to give back."

ON THE COVER

Wendy Demchick-Alloy (left) and Mary C. Pugh outside the courthouse. Inquirer photo by Sarah J. Glover.