

Making the Judicial System *Warm and*

The nightmare of child sexual assault doesn't end with disclosure. Bringing the abuser to justice can be frightening and confusing, and if a child refuses to testify, there's no case. The impact is devastating. An opportunity for the child to transition to survivor vanishes, and a known perpetrator is free. Free to continue abusing that child, and free to abuse more children.

Enter Squiggly and Abbey, two "four-legged advocates" giving child victims of sexual assault the courage and confidence to bring their abusers to justice. Squiggly and Abbey are registered service dogs and a critical piece of FLA-Four Legged Advocates, Inc., (FLA-FLA), a unique non-profit agency founded by Andrea Lockhart of Polk County, FL, that enlists therapy dogs to help children navigate the criminal justice system.

Sexually assaulted as a teen, Andrea was re-victimized by the judicial system and vowed to make a difference for other victims.

"I didn't want anyone else to go through the process like me," says Andrea. "I was lucky to have a family support system. Even with that in place, it's a very scary process."

Dogged Determination

As a criminal justice major at the University of Central Florida, Andrea noted that a source of comfort throughout her ordeal was the family pet, a miniature toy poodle. An idea took form, and she researched the viability of pet therapy for victims of sexual assault.

After earning her master's degree, she worked as a children's advocate in the Tampa area and quickly discovered the difficulties of helping children too scared to testify. When an 8-year-old girl was wavering about testifying, Andrea called her own mother, Kim, and asked for help with getting a service dog, something both Andrea and Kim qualify for due to an unseen disability. What's typically a three-year process took two weeks, and Andrea was united with Squiggly, a 77-pound career-changing canine that helped the child and gave her friend confidence to come forward, too.

A Boy or Girls' Best Friend

Petting, touching and talking to therapy dogs is clinically proven to lower blood pressure, reduce stress and ease depression. Commonly used in nursing homes and hospitals, therapy dogs can be trusted confidants and provide common ground for conversation with other humans.

Kim says with child sexual abuse, a situation typically involving betrayal by a trusted adult, a dog is a good first place for a child to lay his or her trust in a system full of unknown adults. The dogs provide an essential bond



Fuzzy 'One Child at a Time'

and help the child relax. The child seems to believe, "If the dog is nice, then the handler can't be so bad. And if the handler says the detective's okay, and the dog will be with me, then that won't be so bad. And if the dog will come with me, even in the courtroom, then maybe I can do this."

A Warm and Fuzzy Approach

In 2004, Andrea brought Squiggly home to found FLA-FLA, a free advocacy service for child victims of sexual assault. It's a family affair. The service operates out of father Steve's real estate office, her brother assists with marketing and Kim, recently equipped with Abbey, works 40-60 hours a week alongside Andrea as a volunteer children's advocate.

With the goal of taking the "scariness" out of the system, Kim and Andrea see child clients and their families through the criminal justice process. They help interpret intimidating questions, legal jargon and actions within the courtroom in terms that are easily understood and can put the child and family at ease.

They also help the family access resources necessary for the child's recovery. They make referrals to agencies and services that can assist with the case and healing.

Andrea says 80-90 percent of the children she and Squiggly worked with have continued through to conviction. "It makes all the difference when children are willing to tell their stories, and they usually are with the dogs," she says. "It is much easier for the State Attorneys to process and get either a plea bargain or an actual guilty verdict this way."

Because Squiggly and Abbey are service dogs, they can go to the courtroom. The dogs often sit next to the child, but they do not accompany the child to the stand.

"That's an important final step for the child to do alone," says Andrea. "You can see it on their faces when they come down, and they know they did it, and they didn't have anyone's

help. It really is that first step toward surviving. No matter what the outcome, to know that you did everything you could, and that you'll never come back and say 'I should have' or 'I could have' is just tremendous."

Changing the World

FLA-FLA also teaches child sexual abuse prevention at schools and to civic organizations. Kim recalls presenting to unreceptive teenage girls who initially sat with their arms crossed. Later they were petting the dogs and sharing their ideas about sexual abuse.

With the excellent response of children to the program, Andrea hopes to expand it using more human advocates paired with certified therapy dogs. Her work has garnered the attention of Florida State Governor Jeb Bush who recently sent her a letter of commendation.

FLA-FLA's two greatest challenges are getting the word out, so they can help more children, and securing funding. Andrea says most grants are awarded to organizations that can provide at least two years worth of statistics. She is willing to wait as she begins her second year without a paycheck.

"I see the good every day and what these dogs do for the kids, and I know there are children nationwide who can benefit from this program," says Andrea. "That's really what this is all about – getting as many children as we can to move from victim to survivor. We're committed to changing the world one child at a time."

For more information about FLA-FLA or to make a donation, call 1-863-299-9115 or visit their web site at www.fla-fla.org. ■

It makes all the difference when children are willing to tell their stories and they usually are with the dogs.

