

## **St. Louis County Family Court teaches legal professionals about family violence issues**

By Linda Meyers, Special Correspondent

As published in the *St. Louis Daily Record*, Thursday, June 20, 2002

Violence and abuse has a profound impact on many families and has far-reaching implications in the community. Professionals who work with and for Family Court of St. Louis County gathered at Ritenour High School on Friday, June 14, for Stop Court and Train Day to tackle these issues. This year's theme was Family Violence: It Touches All of Us.

The daylong training seminar began at 8:30 a.m. with a continental breakfast and ended at about 4 p.m. Those who attended has the opportunity to broaden their knowledge on topics such as aggression in young children, Missouri's system of care for seriously emotionally disturbed children and treatment programs for domestic violence perpetrators – to name just a few. These seminars were held in classrooms through the high school.

Margaret Donnelly, attorney and guardian ad litem, attended the conference. She said, "The day is a good opportunity for all the various individuals who work in the court to come together and learn together with a common theme. I think it's a wonderful opportunity to be able to interact and share ideas of all the various professionals."

The keynote speaker, Olga Trujillo, talked about her experiences growing up in an abusive home. She is a consultant currently working with the Family Violence Prevention Fund and the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges on issues of violence against women and children. She was the director of the Special Projects Division of the Office for Victims of Crime and was legal counsel in the Office for Victims of Crime. In addition, she brings to her work the personal experience of growing up in a home filled with violence and abuse.

Trujillo told her moving story about growing up in a home where her father physically, sexually and emotionally abused her, her brothers and her mother. The purpose of sharing this story, Trujillo said, is to offer guidance and encouragement to people who have to deal constantly with these issues.

"I try to give these professionals a little bit of guidance on what helped me to survive. It's overwhelming, the things they have to do every day. It's a lot, and it's hard, and they're dealing with really tough cases. It's nice to remind them why they're doing it and the impact that they probably have and don't know they're having. And also, to remind them that they're going to get frustrated because they can't fix it. The little things that they do sometimes are all they are going to be able to do, and that's OK. That's pretty much the goal of my message."

Trujillo also believes that bringing together various professionals who work with family court issues is vital.

"The importance of the conference," Trujillo said, "is getting all these people that should be working together normally – court personnel, guardian ad litems, CASA, prosecutors, defense attorneys, child protective services and domestic violence – all in one place. So at the very least, they get the chance to network, to be able to work together more. What's really nice is that they get to meet each other and get to know each other better so that when they have cases that cross, they're not just calling somebody that they've never met before. The hope for me is that people will work together more through who they meet here and what they learn."

The event wrapped up in the afternoon with the presentation of The Dudley Dunlop Distinguished Guardian Ad Litem Award to Donnelly. The award was presented by Judge Susan E. Block, administrative judge of the Family Court of St. Louis County. Block said of Donnelly, "Margaret is the consummate professional in a courtroom, and the children couldn't be in more caring hands when she represents them."

Block said that the award committee bases its decision on several factors, including reliability, dependability, good relationships with the children, outstanding advocacy and preparation, and the ability to work in the best interests of the child and at the same time be able to convey the wishes of the child to the judge when they may conflict.

Donnelly concentrates her law practice on family and juvenile law. She is a member of the St. Louis County Domestic and Family Violence Council, has chaired the Center for Abused Women and Children Committee, is a member of the Legislative Committee of the Family law Section of The Missouri Bar, which lobbied and helped draft revisions to family law statutes, and is the recipient of the Women Lawyers' Association President's Award of Honor in 2001.

Donnelly commented on her award, "I am very honored to be given the individual recognition to be joining Dudley Dunlop and Bill Grant, the two previous recipients. It's quite a distinction. I am always enjoying my work as a guardian ad litem, and I feel as if the opportunity to work with all of the various staff and members of the community on behalf of children is very satisfying work as a lawyer."

The award has been presented for the last three years.

The 2002 Stop Court and Train Day was sponsored by The Family Court of St. Louis County, St. Louis County Office Division of Family Service, St. Louis County Domestic Violence & Child Maltreatment Initiative and The National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges.