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New Rutgers clinic focuses on doing justice to juveniles

Saturday, January 6, 2007

By LEO STRUPCZEWSKI
Courier-Post Staff
CAMDEN

When the Rutgers University-Camden Law School opens its Children's Justice Clinic this spring, it'll be the first such clinic in the area.

That excites co-directors J.C. Lore and Sandra Simkins.

"We see this as a win-win-win," Simkins said.

While there are free legal clinics in South Jersey to handle civil matters, the Children's Justice Clinic will focus strictly on juveniles who face criminal charges.

And it'll do more than just provide children with a defense attorney, Lore and Simkins said.

Third-year law students will represent offenders in court, work to find the underlying problems contributing to their behavior and seek out services and programs to help them address those problems, Lore said.

To help, the clinic will hire a social worker. Students from the university's School of Social Work will also participate.

"The benefit is we'll have a generally smaller caseload," Lore said. "The students will really get to know their clients -- what's going on at home, at school."

Both he and Simkins have been working with the courts to create a system of referrals. The idea is that the program will eventually ease the burden facing the public-defender's office.

None of this is new to either director.

Both are in their first year at the university, having recently wrapped up careers as public defenders.

Lore worked in both Philadelphia and Cook County, Ill. He also coordinated the Children's Law Pro Bono Project at Northwestern University's Bluhm Legal Clinic. The clinic worked to recruit, train and supervise more than 200 attorneys who represented children in juvenile court.

Most recently, he was a professor at Villanova University's School of Law.

Simkins also worked as a public defender in Philadelphia. There, she was assistant chief of the Juvenile Unit, supervising and training lawyers.

She said there's a direct link between poverty and children and that nearly 90 percent of the girls in the juvenile justice system have suffered from sexual abuse or trauma.

"There's a common misconception of who these kids are," Simkins said. "They deserve so much more."



AL SCHELL/Courier-Post
J. C. Lore (left) and Sandra Simkins are co-directors of the new Rutgers-Camden Children's Justice Clinic.

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"It's really easy to judge kids for the worst thing they've ever done," Lore added. "It takes time to get underneath that."

Lore said his participation in a similar program shaped his career.

While in Chicago, he represented a teenage gang member charged with attempted murder. Through their meetings, Lore was able to explore the real problems and helped find the teen some help.

After serving his time, the teen never once went back into the justice system, Lore said.

"The challenge is really great," Simkins said. "But the opportunity is really great, too."

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