

SMALL SPACES, BIG HEARTS: VISITING SAN FRANCISCO COURTS' CHILDREN'S WAITING ROOMS

Kathleen Guthrie

You expect crying, running, high-decibel noisemakers—all the usual high-energy activity of a daycare center. Yet when you step inside, leaving behind the bustle of the main lobby of the San Francisco Civic Center Courthouse, you are struck by how calm it is. Two children are engaged in a friendly battle in a video game. One quietly cuddles a stuffed animal. Another drives toy trucks, pulled from a well-stocked, yet tidy shelf. Images of Disney princesses and other popular characters smile down at you, and brightly colored children's artwork covers the high walls up to the ceilings. Warm natural light streams through the windows, and the place seems to invite you into its embrace. The staff comes forward to greet you, and you know, you feel, that you are safe. Welcome to the Children's Waiting Room.

Twenty years ago, members of the San Francisco Women Lawyers Alliance (SFWLA) felt compelled to create a safe haven for children who accompanied their parents or guardians when they had business at court. "Everyone said, 'I don't want children to see their parents incarcerated, in handcuffs,'" says Phyllis Deets, retired from Deets Consulting Group, who was part of the original SFWLA committee. "Children were either being left in the hallways or taken into the courtrooms." And when children were brought into the courtrooms, they were not only exposed to the seamier side of the proceedings, but they, being children, could be very disruptive to the serious and important business that was taking place.



Since lower-income families were most affected, the program also needed to be free of charge. "Not all people can afford nannies," explains Gay Grunfeld, a partner at Rosen, Bien & Galvan, who was then president of SFWLA and the project's director. "The courts should be accessible to all people. We must take care of the children so it's possible for [the adults] to take care of their business."

Although new courthouses are now required to provide space for children's waiting rooms, the only model at the time was La Casita, the room that had opened in 1986 in the Sacramento County Courthouse. Deets recalled that many people in San Francisco were "extremely aware of the problem," and "if anyone had the ability to get it done, it was us." Citing its "commitment to use our legal skills to benefit women and children," SFWLA formed a committee in 1988.

Inspired by the success of the Sacramento room, the group quickly raised \$25,000 through grants and private donations. But then, as they sought a suitable and convenient space, they became entangled in bureaucratic red tape. At one point, the committee was shown a broom closet. Three years of steady work consumed the lives of the committee members, but they refused to be discouraged. "It was such a clear-cut, necessary, good idea," Grunfeld says, "and it was absurd to give it up when you have money and need."

Driven by their passion and commitment to the cause, they launched a publicity campaign. Letters were sent, articles were written, city leaders were confronted and encouraged to give their approval. The stalemate finally broke and, in February of 1991, the doors to the Children's Waiting Room at the Hall of Justice opened for the first time. A second room at the San Francisco Civic Center Courthouse welcomed its first young visitors in 1998. This year, as the program marks its twentieth anniversary, the San Francisco facilities will serve about thirty-five hundred visitors. "The Children's Waiting Rooms remain a highlight of the SFWLA legacy," Deets reflects.

Funding the program and finding space were two of the many hurdles the group faced. About a year into the campaign, SFWLA realized they needed someone to administer the program and reached out to the Northern California Service League. The nonprofit agency is

dedicated to creating "safer, healthier communities by helping the incarcerated and the formerly incarcerated become responsible and contributing members of society." Running the Children's Waiting Room program is one of the many services it provides.

The big hearts who run the day-to-day operations are Denise Bradford, the coordinator for the Civic Center Courthouse room, and Máire Larkin, who manages the program and the payroll and coordinates the room at the Hall of Justice. Both have been with the program for more than a decade. They are supported by assistant coordinators and carefully screened volunteers, specifically local college students working toward degrees in early childhood development. Together, they do everything from interacting with the children to performing ongoing housekeeping duties for safety, cleanliness, and keeping things orderly.

This is not a typical daycare center. The children, ranging in ages from infants to teenagers, come in on a drop-in basis. Some stay for thirty minutes, an hour, or a day; some for the duration of a long trial. So, instead of offering a set program or consecutive curriculum, as visitors enter the room, the staff looks for different ways to "nourish" each child. "Sometimes it's as simple as a backrub, something that calms the child down and builds trust quickly," says Bradford. "At other times it may be blowing bubbles."



And the children come to them with a variety of needs. The staff sometimes provides what may be the child's only healthy snack of the day. Occasionally the child needs a clean change of clothes, which the staff selects from donated items.

While the physical needs are more easily met, often it's the emotional needs that are the most challenging to navigate. The scenarios these children are coming from, including domestic violence, custody battles, divorce, separation—what brings their families to court, can have deep impacts. “Many of these children are suffering,” says Bradford, and the staff feels a big part of their jobs—their calling, really—is to give these children respite during their brief visits, to allow them time and space where they are free to simply be children.

Michael Alvarez (the name has been changed to protect the family's privacy) and his three-year-old granddaughter are regular visitors to the Hall of Justice. Alvarez's son is incarcerated and awaiting trial, and for one hour each week, the son gets to spend time with his father and daughter, helping her practice her colors, letters, and numbers, and reading to her from her favorite books, just like he would if he were home. “Family is important to me,” the older Alvarez explains. “I didn't want them separated, and this helps keep the family strong and together.” While waiting to meet with his son, Alvarez and his granddaughter spend transitional

time in the Children's Waiting Room. “Dealing with the law can be scary and frustrating,” Alvarez says. Yet, “When I walk into the room, the vibe changes. It's all positive.” The service is open to anyone doing business at the courthouses. This includes people participating in drug and reentry programs, filing paperwork, or conducting other business in the probation and police departments, as well as witnesses, police officers called to appear on their days off, and jurors.

Rob Hayden, who is self-employed, was selected for jury duty the same day his wife's maternity leave ended, and they desperately scrambled to find day-care for their infant daughter. A clerk recommended the Children's Waiting Room. “I dropped her off in the morning with detailed notes for how to care for a two-month-old,” Hayden says with a laugh, “and they were just delightful.” He watches as his daughter contentedly drinks from a bottle, then falls asleep in a staffer's arms. (Had his wife been the one called to jury duty, the San Francisco Civic Center Courthouse room also provides a “lactation section” for mothers who are nursing or pumping.) “I didn't worry about her,” Hayden says. “It was an overwhelmingly positive experience and a real service.”

This service extends to facilitating court proceedings. As “child support” commissioner for the Superior Court, Rebecca Wightman is often in a position to refer parents to the program. “Often parents



who missed hearings in my department would later tell me it was because no one was home to watch the kids and/or they could not afford childcare,” she says. After she informed them about the Children’s Waiting Room program, “the number of nonappearances decreased dramatically.” The availability of the program, she emphasizes, “means greater access to justice and the courts, particularly for lower-income individuals.” She encourages people to step inside for a quick tour. “Seeing the resource firsthand tells you more about the Children’s Waiting Room than just ‘knowing’ about it.”

Wightman, along with her colleagues, continues to be a strong supporter of the program, sometimes simply by “making sure that extra juice boxes from other events in the building make their way down to the room.” While court filing fees have covered the rooms’ operating budget since 1999, there is still a need for donations of cash and goods. Wightman also encourages participation in the holiday “Wish Trees,” which are displayed in both lobbies in December. Anyone can select and fulfill a child’s special request for a toy or needed item.

“It’s all about the children,” says Bradford. And with their best interests in mind, Grunfeld, Deets, BASF’s CLE Director Barbara Fanning, and other concerned individuals recently joined forces to create more awareness about the Children’s Waiting Room program. Flyers and new signage were created in English, Spanish, and Mandarin to reach more parents/guardians. Articles such as this have appeared to encourage attorneys and court personnel to spread the word to clients, witnesses, and jurors.

“This program should go on forever because it is needed in the legal system,” says Bradford. “There are a lot of things children should not be a part of. This room takes them away from what they’re here for. It

lets them know they are safe here and separated from whatever is out there.”

“Like a mother’s job, this job is never done,” says Larkin. But the payoff is worth it. “One of the things that comes out of the rooms is hope,” she says. For whatever their circumstances, for a brief but impactful period, these children “see a different possibility.”

“They can forget the rest of the world,” says Bradford. “This lets kids know there are nice people in the world.”

Or as Deets simply states, “It’s a safe place for children—and it’s free!”

Kathleen Guthrie is a San Francisco-based freelance writer. Her work has appeared in Diabolo, 805 Living, and AAA’s Westways and Via magazines.

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KATHLEEN RYAN READING ROOM

“She really loved kids,” said Stuart Hanlon of his late wife, Kathleen Ryan. While raising two young sons, Ryan developed a thriving family law practice and provided pro bono services for related organizations, including BASF’s Volunteer Legal Services Program and the UC Hastings College of the Law Family Law Clinic. Well known in the legal community as a progressive activist, she was also known to friends as a “legendary party thrower.” She was full of life and fun, so it was a huge blow to family, friends, and colleagues when an aggressive form of leukemia took her life in 1997, just six months after diagnosis.

Initially, contributions to a memorial in her name were given to help other families of leukemia patients. Her grieving friends then had another idea. “Kathy was very involved in children’s rights,” explained Hanlon, of Hanlon & Reif and a member of the BASF board of directors. She was very concerned with how parents used children, involving them in the “nightmare of divorce and custody fights.” And so, her friends rallied around a plan to create a place where these children could feel safe.

Flyers went out to “tons” of friends, said Jennifer Jackson of Collaborative Law and Mediation, with an unusual invitation. Instead of hosting a gala or

concert, the coordinators requested small contributions. “The whole idea,” she explained, “was people paid *not* to attend another fundraising event!” The response was enthusiastic, and as the money rolled in, BASF’s Family Law Section started shopping. The group bought a table, rugs, and bookshelves, and stocked the room with new and donated books and toys.

Today, the “Kathleen Ryan Waiting Room” on the fourth floor of the San Francisco Civic Center Courthouse is a testament to Ryan’s values and her friends’ generosity. Next to the clerk’s office, “it provides a play area for children to use while their parents are waiting in line to file documents or waiting to go into mediation,” explained Unified Family Court Administrator Claire Williams. While it isn’t staffed like the Children’s Waiting Room downstairs, it does provide another respite for children caught up in the turmoil of their parents’ legal business.

“They refurbished the room so kids have a safe haven,” said Hanlon. It is a loving gift that has benefited many children in subsequent years, and a fitting tribute to the woman who was so dedicated to protecting them.