

Change a Child's Life Forever

By John G. Gaul

I TOOK MY FIRST CASE WITH THE Support Center for Child Advocates (Child Advocates) as a volunteer child advocate attorney in 2010. I have mentored children for many years, so using my legal skills to represent a child who has been traumatized by abuse and neglect seemed to be a natural extension of that passion.

As a youth coach and volunteer Big Brother, I try to provide a stable influence and example for my players and my Little Brothers who, in turn, have helped me become more patient and empathic.

Becoming a lawyer for a child was somehow different. Perhaps the stakes seemed greater, as there was only one chance for success. I felt failure was unacceptable. Was I prepared to go to court and advocate for what is best for a child who has suffered the kind of trauma that no child should experience? On a professional level, this was way outside my comfort zone.

The beauty of Child Advocates is the

support – you are trained and supported throughout the representation. I took the daylong CLE course “How to Handle a Child Abuse Case,” and spent a morning at Family Court observing others in action. I attended an initial case meeting where I met with my staff social worker partner and consulting attorney and began planning our strategy in my first case. With that invaluable start, I was focused on getting the best result for my clients.

My first client was an infant who was removed from her mother's care due to parental addiction and mental illness. I remained on the case for close to three years, ultimately advocating for a termination of parental rights that enabled the child to be adopted by an extended family member. She is now healthy and in a loving family home without the threat of harm she would have faced daily had we not succeeded.

All cases have their challenges, some more so than others; but all critically important to the life of the child. I have been involved in a complex case involving the

murder of a three-month-old by his father, representing not only the baby's sister but the three surviving half-sisters and advocating for the best living arrangements and appropriate therapeutic services for each. I was also appointed to represent each survivor in the criminal matter. When her mother refused to testify against the murderer, I had to decide whether it was in my pre-teen client's best interests to testify and to ensure that she was emotionally able to do so. I decided she was strong enough to testify just moments before she was called, and she did so beautifully, resulting in the conviction of the defendant. It was the most gratifying day of my legal career.

In Philadelphia we are lucky to have many opportunities for pro bono service with incredible public interest firms. I recommend that you consider taking a case with Child Advocates. This work changes a life forever. It may just be your own.

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Veterans

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a “Day of Service” campaign. The Veterans Group plans to lead volunteer activities for more than 50 Pepper employees with the Veterans Multi-Service Center and Liberty USO, and will select a military charity that will receive a significant donation from the firm.

Pepper Hamilton is proud of the men and women in the United States armed forces and has made a concerted effort to support the firm's veterans and reserve military service members. Their service to this country is commendable and, through the Pepper Veterans Group, will continue for years to come.

Ryan E. Peters (petersr@pepperlaw.com) is an associate attorney at Pepper Hamilton. Prior to joining Pepper Hamilton, he served as a United States Navy SEAL with multiple combat deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan. He remained in the SEAL Reserves after joining Pepper Hamilton and was recalled back to active duty for a one-year mobilization in support of Operation Enduring Freedom. He received the full support of Pepper Hamilton during the mobilization and returned to Pepper Hamilton in the fall of 2014.

CHANGE THE STORY
AN EVENING FOR CHILD ADVOCACY

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WEDNESDAY, APRIL 22, 2015
THE CRYSTAL TEA ROOM
THE WANAMAKER BUILDING

4:30PM DISTINGUISHED ADVOCATE PRESENTATION
5-8PM RECEPTION & AUCTION

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Dunleavy The Legal Intelligence

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Tactix The Tenant Broker
Independence AMY FOX AND DANIEL WHEELER
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