

A life spent advocating fiercely for children

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Cecilia Zalkind remembers thinking no child deserved this.

It was her job to tell the little boy he would have new parents, to introduce him to the family adopting him, and to make him comfortable over a series of visits.

But when she opened his case file, her stomach sank.

His biological parents had signed a consent form placing him for adoption when he was 3 days old, and no one ever acted on it. For eight years, he lived with a family that didn't want him.

"So here I am, driving this 8-year-old who, eight years ago as a baby, could have been placed with a family but has to go through the trauma of leaving one family and moving to another," she said. "That was heart-wrenching. How do you tell a child, 'Well, this is going to be better, it's a permanent family'?"

Zalkind's dozen years with the state's child welfare agency had given her up-close views of child hardship. It also set the stage for her life's work.

Over the past 25 years with the Association for Children of New Jersey -- a period spanning the terms of seven governors -- Zalkind has become the fiercest child advocate in New Jersey. Governors seek her counsel. Lawmakers solicit her input. **This summer brought national recognition: the Florette Angel Memorial Child Advocacy Award, from VOICES For America's Children.**

"It's never been about Ceil, it's been about the kids she represents," said Sen. Joseph Vitale (D-Middlesex), chairman of the Health, Human Services and Senior Citizens Committee.

During her time with the state Division of Youth and Family Services, Zalkind saw lots of heartbreaking cases.

"I grew up in Clifton in an intact family. My parents are still alive, they've been married for 67 years. Nothing had prepared me for this," Zalkind recalled. "I was naive. It was a real awakening as to the problems that families face and what happens to kids. "Â I think every child deserves a family that offers unconditional love."

Zalkind, 62 and the married mother of two grown children, had known about misfortune, but it was through the experiences of her parents. Her mother had been orphaned at 13. Her father had grown up with a brother in a group home in Bergen County after his mother contracted tuberculosis and his father deserted the family.

As a young girl, Zalkind remembers hearing her father discuss the emotional turmoil of his childhood.

"He talks about it even now," she said, "that this was a difficult childhood "Â that nobody advocated for him."

Zalkind didn't plan to protect children, but after majoring in English at New York University, she had trouble finding work and answered an ad for social work trainees.

"I had very little concept of what DYFS did," she recalled.

Helping kids was rewarding but "an eye-opener in terms of the limitations of working one child at a time."

While pregnant and on bed rest in 1978, she decided to pursue a degree at Rutgers law school. Then she landed a job with the Association for Children of New Jersey, a Newark-based group that researches children's issues and lobbies for improvements.

Working for Change

Zalkind pushed for reforms to the state's troubled child welfare system, years before a 1999 class-action lawsuit would lead to a \$1 billion overhaul.

"Before there was a judge " before federal monitors, there was ACNJ holding the line on child welfare," said Anthony D'Urso, chairman of the state Child Fatality and Near Fatality Review Board, which evaluates circumstances of child tragedies.

As a public-policy director, Zalkind embarked on projects that would rattle the child welfare system.

One of her studies revealed a state foster system in which kids constantly moved between homes, some as many as 20 times before they were adopted, leaving them psychologically scarred. Another undertaking, an anonymous telephone hotline for state workers, families and professionals, revealed DYFS caseworkers were overwhelmed, some abuse complaints were ignored, and those who needed the agency the most had the least faith in it.

They sparked policy changes and recommendations for reform.

"That was the first time that the system was looked at as a whole," said Zalkind, who became the group's executive director in 2001.

While Zalkind's work won fans and influence with those in power, some have criticized her advocacy as one-sided. Richard Wexler, the head of the National Coalition for Child Protection, which discourages a reliance on foster care, said the philosophy of Zalkind's group is geared toward removing children from troubled homes instead of resolving family issues. He also says Zalkind failed to support the lawsuit that sparked the major DYFS overhaul.

Zalkind acknowledges the importance of keeping families together, but says child safety is paramount. As for the lawsuit, she says she initially was worried it would divert focus from ongoing child welfare reforms.

Health Care Reform

In addition to working to improve the child welfare system, Zalkind has played a role in creating the state's first health insurance program for children, and a preschool program for 3- and 4-year-olds that she believes is the nation's best.

On a recent day, she read to 3-year-olds at the Egenolf Early Childhood Center, which contracts with the Elizabeth School District to provide pre-kindergarten. She got up and danced with 14 children, all jumping and swinging from side to side.

She said, "It's like a booster shot of enthusiasm, to see the results."

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