Why I Fight Child Abuse and Neglect by Sarah Hansel

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Someone recently asked me why I give my time, treasure and talent to the Parent Child Center of Tulsa when I know that our society will never end child abuse and neglect.

I acknowledge that it is a daunting problem. In 2017, the U.S. government reported that 4.1 million cases of child abuse and neglect were referred to child protective services. In Tulsa County, there were 10,744 child abuse investigations conducted by the Department of Human Services in 2018 and, of those, 2,685 cases were confirmed.

With a problem so large, my friend asked, how could my miniscule efforts ever make any measurable difference?

Although I believe that I have a social and moral obligation to help my community become a better place to live, and although I am grateful for the loving family I have always had and hope for the same for others less fortunate than I, I have a more practical reason to help reduce child abuse and neglect. As a lawyer, business owner and member of this community, economic development and prosperity for all of Tulsa is important to me.

Many studies have documented the direct connection between child abuse and neglect and lifelong health and social problems. Health problems include high-risk behavior such as smoking, substance abuse and obesity, which in turn increase the risk of chronic lung disease, heart disease, diabetes and other life-shortening health problems. Social problems include a higher likelihood that a person from an abusive childhood will drop out of school, experience teen pregnancy, have difficulty keeping a job, difficulty with personal relationships, commit crimes and repeat the cycle of their early childhood experience by abusing and neglecting their own children. The financial burden on society caused by these health and social issues is enormous and affects our entire community.

If you accept the fact that there is a direct connection between child abuse and social and health problems, then you can easily accept the fact that children who do not experience abuse and neglect and instead have a healthy start at life are more likely to finish their education, stay employed, have families when they are emotionally and financially ready to do so, pay taxes, become productive members of their Tulsa

community and perhaps even feel socially and morally motivated to “give back.”

How much more effective, efficient and practical if we address the root of the problem by educating and providing alternatives to parents, many of whom have been subject to abuse and neglect as a child, so that they will not perpetuate the endless cycle of abuse and neglect on their own children? If we not only save a child from a high-risk, life-threatening future, but save society from the financial burden of providing health and social services that could have been avoided had the abuse been avoided, then it is easy to see the value to our entire community.

Addressing and preventing the problem requires participation from everyone in our community, and at the parent child center, we know that child abuse prevention succeeds because of the partnerships we have created with child welfare, education, health, community and faith-based organizations, businesses and law enforcement agencies.

I am not naïve enough to think that we will ever end child abuse and neglect, but I know that changing the future of one child’s life and putting that child on a path of personal prosperity means there will be at least one less client for nonprofit and government social programs to provide services in the future. We do that because it is the right thing to do; protecting children is its own reward. We also do it out of enlightened self-interest. Children who grow up paying taxes, keeping jobs, having healthy family and participating in the betterment of their community help ensure economic development and prosperity for our entire community. You don’t even have to feel a social and moral duty to see that the problem of child abuse and neglect is something that we should all work toward reducing.

Attorneys

- Sarah E. Hansel