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Bringing Children Into The Light Of Justice

UPDATE Dallas attorney and child advocate Barbara Elias-Perciful was honored in August by the American Bar Association's Young Lawyers Division as the Distinguished Lawyer recipient of the 2009 Child Advocacy Award for her service on behalf of abused and neglected children. The prestigious award is based on an individual's personal achievements and impact in helping abused and neglected children.

After nearly a decade as a successful attorney, Barbara Elias-Perciful ('84) discovered "an entire legal universe that I didn't even know existed."

In 1993 she was appointed by the court to serve as a pro bono attorney in a child protection case. That experience revealed to her a system that is overburdened with cases and starved for resources. In representing Sarah – a 12-year-old girl who had been sexually abused by her father for years – Elias-Perciful found that the county's budget provided few tools, such as expert medical and psychological consultants for case preparation, to assist attorneys and judges in making a "life-and-death decision" for the child.

A case usually lasts a year, at the end of which the attorney recommends returning a child to his or her home or removing the child permanently.

Sarah's father's rights were terminated, and she eventually was reunited with her mother. During the case, however, Elias-Perciful decided that as an attorney she could not remain in her comfortable position working on business litigation with Carrington, Coleman, Sloman & Blumenthal. In 1994 she started a solo practice focusing on child protection issues.

A year later, Elias-Perciful founded a nonprofit organization, **Texas Loves Children Inc. (TLC)**. With co-sponsors such as the Dallas County Family and Juvenile Courts, TLC offers seminars by recognized experts on critical legal, medical and mental health issues for judges, attorneys and others working with cases involving child abuse and neglect.

Even with training, attorneys and judges, especially in smaller Texas counties, often are stymied by a lack of research tools, she says. In May 2004 TLC's scope expanded with the launch of **Texas Lawyers for Children**, a statewide collaborative effort offering free online access to crucial materials for attorneys and judges, as well as e-mail networks and a pro bono network that lists attorneys willing to provide free assistance.

"TLC's resources have helped legal professionals across the state, impacting the lives of thousands of children," says Elias-Perciful.

Texas Loves Children is wholly supported by private donations and grants. Volunteers also play a role in TLC's work. SMU law students, for example, have helped by conducting initial research for review by TLC's experienced attorneys, she says. Elias-Perciful teamed up with **Fred Moss**, associate professor in **Dedman School of Law** and her mock trial coach in law school, to establish an externship program, which enables students to earn law school credits for their work with TLC.

TLC has created an online center for the state of California, and 31 other states have expressed interest in learning more about using TLC as a model.

In addition, TLC has launched Improving Outcomes campaign to promote the sharing of best-practice information with the goal of improving the quality of case outcomes for abused and neglected children. Improving Outcomes provides judges, attorneys and other child welfare professionals with expertise in legal, medical and mental health aspects of child abuse cases through a three-tiered child abuse court resource network.



Barbara Elias-Perciful founded Texas Loves Children to assist lawyers, judges and others working with child protection cases.