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Meet Your Neighbor

Mary Blum

Retired corporate lawyer stands up for children

Warren Sinsheimer, a retired corporate lawyer and longtime Scarsdale resident, is the founder of the Partnership for Children's Rights in Manhattan.

Mary Blum: *You have said you are transforming lives through law. Can you elaborate on that?*

Warren Sinsheimer: I believe that the lives of our special education clients at Partnership for Children's Rights are considerably brighter than they would have been without our advocacy. Thanks to our intervention, children are receiving legally entitled special education services that will give them their best shot at success in life. Some of our clients are now college-bound. Others are moving into vocational jobs that will help them to earn a livelihood and live independently. I am pleased to be able to say that we are helping up to 1,000 clients a year to move toward productive adulthood.

Q: *You have been honored for your various pro bono endeavors. The pleasure of giving is often said to be its own reward. If you could send a message to young people today about civic responsibility, what would you say?*

A: I believe that people who have had an opportunity to succeed in life have an obligation to share some of that opportunity with those who are less fortunate.

Q: *You served as an Air Force JAG officer overseas during the Korean War (based in Japan). What experience stands out most in your memory?*

A: I prosecuted 200 cases, from murder and rape to petty larceny, involving military personnel. I also took care of legal problems for several thousand air force personnel on the base, including wills and tax matters.

Q: *What do you think about the apparent cultural thaw in North Korea?*

A: Although I was never stationed in Korea, I did travel to South Korea in the



Warren Sinsheimer with Apallah Simpkins, the mother of one of his clients, at Partnership for Children's Rights benefit last May, which was also an 80th birthday party for Sinsheimer. The benefit raised over \$700,000.

'80s. I found it sad for the South Koreans to have been deprived of their rights to see family and friends in the north. I am hopeful that cultural exchanges will be able to bring about some rapprochement between North and South Korea, although I have my doubts.

Q: *You served a term as a Republican member of the state Assembly. Was that a fulfilling experience? What were the issues of the day?*

A: I enjoyed my term in the Assembly and it taught me many things, including how to listen to the problems of everyday people and react with compassion. Two major issues stood out during my term: (1) I supported the first-time imposition of the New York state sales tax, designed by

then-Governor Rockefeller as the "education tax" because all of the tax revenues were supposed to go to education; and (2) I vehemently opposed the preposterous suggestion of Robert Moses to build a bridge across the Long Island Sound, which would have emptied out in the middle of my district, in Rye.

Q: *Back in the '60s, you were a U.S. lawyer for Plessey North America. Later you became chairman and CEO. While there, you helped create a new financial instrument called "dollar shares" bringing the American company public. During this time you were traveling abroad and back constantly. I even understand there was one pre-Concord trip where you flew*

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Retired corporate lawyer stands up for children

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to London and back in 24 hours. How did you survive?

A: On adrenaline! However, I must point out that I wasn't the only businessperson in the U.S. doing such extensive travel, and of course I accepted it as part of the job.

Q: *Plessey specialized in circuitry, telecommunications and electronics. While it was poised on the verge of the new computer revolution, was it cutting edge at the time?*

A: Yes, indeed! We took licenses from many companies, including Bell Labs (a division of AT&T), IBM, Sylvania and others. We also licensed the technology of our labs in the U.K. to our U.S. friends.

Q: *In 1964 you became chairman of the National Scranton Campaign for President — hoping for William Scranton to beat Barry Goldwater and oppose LBJ. You visited 43 states. What was behind that effort?*

A: I founded the National Scranton Campaign for President because I was convinced that Senator Goldwater would be the Republican Party nominee for president and that he would not be able to prevail against President Johnson, whose policies I abhorred. I was a "liberal Republican" and I did not want to see the Republican Party captured by the ultra right wing, as represented by Goldwater. Thanks to a competent staff, I was able to make as many forays as I did into the hinterlands on behalf of Governor Scranton.

Q: *How did all those prior experiences prepare you for your role as founder of Partnership for Children's Rights?*

A: My role in the political world was a direct and powerful precursor of my desire to do something for people, particularly those who are disadvantaged and cannot successfully advocate for themselves. Politics is all about doing things for the good of society and for one's constituency. My political involvement made me increasingly aware of the problems of everyday people and their need to have someone championing their rights.

Q: *Can you briefly describe how Partnership for Children's Rights works?*

A: PFCR now stands at the forefront of organizations dedicated to protecting the rights of disadvantaged disabled children by helping them to attain legally entitled special education services and Social Security

disability benefits. Each year, we help up to 1,000 low-income clients who would otherwise not receive the educational programs or services they require to succeed and become productive adults. We work on a lean budget with only five paid staff and up to 20 volunteers, many of them attorneys like me who have retired from a career in law and are eager to give back to those less fortunate. (I have worked without remuneration since PFCR's founding in 1999.) As a nonprofit organization, we rely substantially on the generosity of individuals, corporations and foundations. I encourage my Scarsdale friends and neighbors to view PFCR's Web site at www.pfcr.org and, while there, to take a moment and play the DVD, which will provide a heartwarming snapshot of some of the clients we serve and how we have changed their lives for the better. All donations are accepted, no matter what the denomination!

Q: *Of the 7,000+ children who have been helped by this service, can you give a few examples of some success stories and where some of the first clients might be today?*

A: There are many success stories! Caitlyn, who suffers from dyslexia, had refused to participate in her public school classroom by age 12 because she felt hopelessly confused and frustrated. PFCR arranged for the NYC Department of Education to send her to a private school specializing in dyslexia and other language processing disorders. Four years later, Caitlyn is an engaged high school senior and class leader who has applied to attend a four-year college in the fall.

Bettina, a low-functioning adolescent with an IQ in the low 50s range, had drifted through public special education classrooms without developing even the most basic reading, writing or math skills. Thanks to our intervention, she now receives eight hours of private tutoring per week which have led to substantial gains in her reading skills.

Alex, who suffers from cerebral palsy and is wheelchair-bound, was denied porter services from his fourth-floor apartment (in a nonelevator building) to the school bus. Without such services, Alex was effectively precluded from attending school. Through PFCR's legal advocacy, Alex's porter services were swiftly reinstated.

There are hundreds more stories like those of Caitlyn, Bettina and Alex, each of whom is now moving toward a productive future thanks to the advocacy we have been able to provide.

Q: *You and your wife Florence have created both scholarship and fellowship awards at NYU Law School. Who qualifies and why did you create the fellowship?*

A: In 1993, my wife and I established the Sinsheimer Service Scholarship at NYU Law School, a three-year, full-tuition scholarship. Each scholarship recipient must agree to work for three years after law school or judicial clerkships in public interest civil law representing individuals who cannot otherwise afford legal representation.

In 2007, we established the Sinsheimer Children's Rights Fellowship for NYU Law School graduates or graduates completing clerkships. Each year, PFCR will select one fellow to serve as a paid attorney at our organization. Our first fellow, a highly qualified NYU law school graduate named Dalit Frieda Paradis, has recently been selected for a start date of September 2008.

Q: *What are some of the recipients doing now?*

A: Our first Sinsheimer Service Scholar clerked for Judge Edwards, Chief Judge of the Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit in the District of Columbia, and then for Justice Stevens of the U.S. Supreme Court. Prior to joining a law firm, he spent several years at the ACLU focusing on immigration law. I recently had the privilege on two occasions of hearing him argue in the U.S. Supreme Court on behalf of poor people. Other Sinsheimer Scholars have been and remain at the ACLU Immigration unit, Bronx Legal Services, the Capital Defenders program in Atlanta, and other such organizations.

Q: *Are there plans to expand the services outside of the city?*

A: I have long desired to expand the PFCR program outside of New York City. We are currently considering the possibility of opening an office in Newark. However, my first responsibility is to ensure that PFCR continues to thrive in New York City, where the needs are still great — there are an estimated 160,000 special education children in the city.

Q: *Have we left anything out?*

A: Yes, the joy that I (and people with whom I work at PFCR) feel when we can help even a few underprivileged people to realize the hopes and dreams that all of us have.