

ELLEN O'NEILL-STEPHENS: Advocating for justice with compassion

BY JONELLA FRANK



Ellen O'Neill-Stephens ('83) is devoting herself to making the justice system more humane. Her work with Courthouse Dogs Foundation — inspired by a boy and his dog — focuses on an innovative approach of pursuing justice with compassion. O'Neill-Stephens and the internationally recognized program, promoted by the foundation, are making a difference in countless lives.



Attendees of the 2015 International Courthouse Dogs Conference are pictured in the King County Courthouse, where the conference was held.



Ellen O'Neill-Stephens and Jeeter pose for a photo in the King County Courthouse in 2008.

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Ellen O'Neill-Stephens is a former senior deputy prosecutor in the King County Prosecuting Attorney's Office in Seattle. She retired in 2011 after 26 years to pursue a cause close to her heart. She now works full time to advance Courthouse Dogs Foundation's mission of promoting the use of professionally trained facility dogs to provide emotional support to everyone in the justice system. By zealously and effectively advocating for that mission, O'Neill-Stephens has garnered much attention. And, after people see one of the dogs in action, they are true believers in the program.

O'Neill-Stephens was born in Enid, Oklahoma, into an Air Force family. She moved from the state when she was only 6 months old, not to return until 1980, when she entered the OU College of Law as a first-year student. Prior to law school, she earned a bachelor's degree in sociology from Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia, and worked as a probation officer in the Norfolk Juvenile and Domestic Relations Court. As a result of observing court proceedings in that job, she decided to become a lawyer, and more specifically, a prosecutor.

After completing law school, O'Neill-Stephens moved with her family to

Seattle, where her husband accepted a pediatric residency. She landed a job as an intern in the King County Prosecuting Attorney's Office. After passing the Washington Bar Exam, she accepted a job as a deputy prosecutor and began her career, working as assigned, in various divisions within the office. Almost 20 years later, while working in the juvenile drug court program, the idea for what ultimately developed into Courthouse Dogs Foundation began to develop, and experiences from her personal life helped shape the course of the remaining years of her prosecutorial career and the years beyond.

In 1982, during her second year of law school, the first of her three children was born. Sean Stephens was diagnosed at birth with cerebral palsy. He is unable to walk, use his hands or speak. Sean is totally dependent on others and has spent his life in a wheelchair.

Even while facing a multitude of challenges, Sean possesses a positive attitude, a wonderful smile and an uncanny ability to connect with people.

He was popular in high school, attended the prom with a date and received a standing ovation at graduation. But after high school, Sean's social opportunities dramatically decreased.

In 2003, Sean and his parents traveled to Santa Rosa, California, to Canine Companions for Independence, a nonprofit organization that provides trained assistance dogs, at no cost, to people with disabilities. There they met and trained with a new member of their family – a Labrador-golden retriever mix named Jeeter. Jeeter was Sean's service dog, best friend and people-magnet for eight years.

Sean, Jeeter and O'Neill-Stephens made numerous appearances in the Seattle community, providing information about people with disabilities, and demonstrating how service dogs can help. Jeeter would draw people to Sean. The dog's presence and his calm, friendly manner encouraged individuals, who might otherwise have been reluctant to approach Sean and interact with him. In speaking of the impact of the Sean-Jeeter duo, O'Neill-Stephens said, "One of the most important things people learned from their partnership is that disabled people can make the world a better place too."

One day each week when Sean was with a caregiver, Jeeter accompanied O'Neill-Stephens to work at the King County Prosecuting Attorney's Office, where she was the juvenile drug court prosecutor. Jeeter became the young drug court participants' unofficial mascot. The dog's soothing effect and unconditional

support helped them through stressful times in court.

Word of Jeeter's tension-reducing capabilities spread quickly. One day, a fellow deputy prosecutor asked to introduce Jeeter to a young boy who was unwilling to talk about abuse he had suffered at the hands of his mother. After playing with Jeeter for about 30 minutes, the child opened up and was able to provide the prosecutor with enough information to file charges against the woman.

Later, another prosecutor asked for Jeeter's assistance on a case involving the sexual abuse of 7-year-old twin sisters who were very shy and terrified about testifying in court against their father. The girls were instantly drawn to Jeeter and a strong bond developed.

When the trial judge allowed Jeeter to sit with each girl on the witness stand, they both were able to testify about the actions of their father. During their testimony, Jeeter sat next to them and occasionally put his head on their laps while they petted him.

The seed of a concept was now firmly planted. Jeeter, the sweet, intelligent dog that assisted Sean, had not only provided a calming influence for the teenagers in drug court, but had given the emotional support two young girls needed in order to confront and testify against their abusive father. O'Neill-Stephens saw the possibilities for using dogs to help make the criminal justice system more humane.

With O'Neill-Stephens' encouragement and guidance, the King County

Prosecuting Attorney's Office got a dog of its own in 2004. Ellie and handler Paige Ulrey, a senior deputy prosecutor, were the first facility dog team placed in a court setting in the United States by Canine Companions for Independence, establishing the first courthouse facility dog program. About two years later, Stilson and his handler, the victims' advocate in the Snohomish County Prosecuting Attorney's Office, became the second facility dog team in a courthouse venue.

As word spread of the benefits of these dogs, and more inquiries about their use were made, O'Neill-Stephens realized there needed to be a formal organization to promote the concept. In 2008, she and veterinarian Celeste Walsen formed Courthouse Dogs LLC, which in 2012 became Courthouse Dogs Foundation.

As executive director of the foundation, Walsen works to develop nationally recognized guidelines utilizing scientific research to equip victims' advocates, forensic interviewers, prosecuting attorneys and other legal professionals to effectively use facility dogs to provide support for vulnerable people of all ages. Since her retirement as a prosecutor, O'Neill-Stephens, as founder of the nonprofit, focuses on program expansion.

Through their efforts in educating and guiding interested agencies, facility dog programs have been established in prosecutor's offices, law enforcement agencies, child advocacy centers and family courts. There are currently 94 facility dogs working in 29 states and the District of Columbia. In addition, O'Neill-Stephens and Walsen have assisted

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with the implementation of facility dog programs in Canada and Chile.

O’Neill-Stephens and Courthouse Dogs Foundation have received international recognition. In 2014, the organization was the recipient of the Victims’ Rights Partnership Award presented by the National Crime Victim Law Institute. The Hague Institute for the Internationalization of the Law acknowledged O’Neill-Stephens’ work in the international competition for its 2013 Innovating Justice Award. In the same year, *O, The Oprah Magazine* named her a “Local Hero” for her work educating legal professionals about the impact a dog can have in court. In addition, she was included as one of the “100 Best and Brightest” for amazing advancements in the dog world over the past 25 years in a list compiled by *The Bark* magazine in 2010.

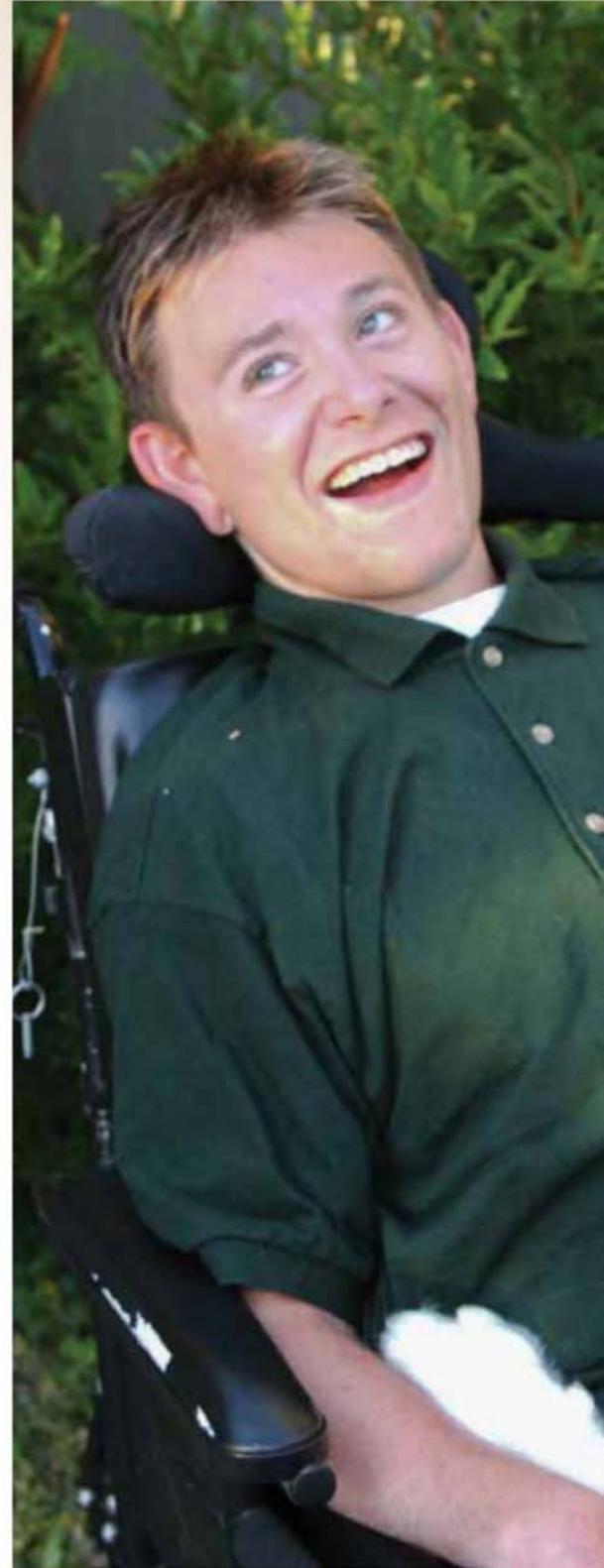
One of the 94 courthouse facility dogs is Tulah, based in Oklahoma’s Kay County Courthouse in the office of District Attorney Brian Hermanson (’78). After learning about Courthouse Dogs in 2013 at a national conference, Hermanson talked to Sara Palmer, the

victims’ advocate in his office, who contacted O’Neill-Stephens through the foundation’s website. Because of her previous contacts with the state of Oklahoma, when O’Neill-Stephens saw the inquiry from Palmer, she quickly responded.

“Ellen was integral to getting our program off the ground,” said Palmer, who is Tulah’s handler. “She helped me identify persons who needed to be on board and anticipate issues that might arise.”

Palmer told of a case involving a 12-year-old girl who had been sexually abused four years prior. The first time the case was set for preliminary hearing, she was unable to testify and the case was continued. Before the date of the next hearing, Tulah began working in the DA’s Victim Witness Center. The young girl visited with the dog several times and they developed a relationship.

When it came time for the girl to testify and she struggled, the judge told her she could give her answers to Tulah instead of the attorneys. Drawing on the silent, comforting support of her new friend





Sean Stephens and his service dog Jeeter provided the inspiration for the courthouse facility dog programs.

Tulah, the young victim was able to answer questions and finish the hearing. Referring to this case and numerous others, Palmer said, "The Courthouse Dog program has made a measurable difference in the experiences of people coming through the justice system in Kay County."

Almost 900 miles across the country in Akron, Ohio, Summit County Prosecuting Attorney Sherri Bevan Walsh returned from a 20th National District Attorneys Association conference inspired to apply for a facility dog for her office. Two years later, after extensive training at Canine Companions for Independence, Avery and his handler, Melanie Hart, Walsh's administrative assistant, became an important part of the office, working to put victims and witnesses at ease so they are able to confidently and accurately testify.

"Avery's primary job is to provide emotional support to crime victims and witnesses, specifically children and adults with developmental disabilities," explained Walsh. "Because of the serious nature of the crimes we prosecute, the victims and witnesses who come to our office are typically severely traumatized. Avery calms these adults and children, helping to reduce the likelihood of them becoming traumatized again."

In addition to working in criminal cases, Avery also participates in two specialty courts in the Summit County Court of Common Pleas – The Turning Point, a drug court, and Valor Court, a court handling cases involving military veterans. His presence helps alleviate stress for participants, as well as their

family and friends. Upon graduation from the court program, Avery rewards each successful participant with a candy-filled congratulatory mug from Walsh.

One of the courthouse facility dog programs operating outside the United States is found in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, based at the Zebra Child Protection Centre, the first Canadian child advocacy center utilizing a multidisciplinary team approach in responding to allegations of child abuse. Facility dogs Wren and Fossey, a mother-daughter team, work with their handlers to help provide a sense of compassion, support and protection for the young abuse victims and their families who find themselves in the stress-filled environment of the criminal justice system.

Samantha Dover, director of community education and engagement, explained the dogs play different roles as the child moves through the process. A child's first contact with one of the dogs will be during the meet-and-greet period at the initial interview. Later, a dog will be present during the forensic interview with the child "to offer that unconditional support during a time in which they might need it the most."

Wren and Fossey also make courthouse visits, where they sit with the families in one of the Zebra Centre's waiting rooms prior to the child's testimony. In addition, since March 20' 5, the dogs have been going on the witness stand with the children while they testify.

Dover told of a 7-year-old girl who had come in for her interview, but because





she was so scared, did not want to talk about anything. Instead of pressuring the child with more questions, the interviewer left the room, got Fossey and put the dog into the interview room with the child so it was just the two of them.

“Once the interviewer left again, the little girl leaned over while petting the dog and said, ‘Fossey, do you want to know what happened to me?’” said Dover. “She then proceeded to tell the dog her entire story. All of our forensic interviews are video recorded so her story was captured and she didn’t have to repeat those details to the interviewers again.”

In October, more than 40 people and dogs gathered in Seattle for the 2015 International Courthouse Dogs Conference. Some of them (people and dogs) were new to the Courthouse Dogs program, others had years of experience. They came to the conference from 20 states across the United States, four provinces in Canada, Chile and Spain.

In attendance were professionals from many fields: attorneys, investigators, police officers, victims’ advocates, forensic interviewers, court administrators, prosecutors, nurses, dog breeders, judges, professors, social workers, dog trainers, veterinarians, child therapists, public information officers, dog handlers, students and executive directors of organizations.

The dogs also were professionals, some more experienced than others, but still, all professionals. That is, until ... the final speaker was finished, the courtroom doors were closed, the dogs’ work vests were taken off, and the toys were tossed.

Then, they were just dogs having fun running, chasing, barking and playing. When it was time for the vests to go back on, it was all business again. This amazing transformation underscored how well-trained facility dogs must be.

It takes approximately two years of professional training at an accredited service dog organization for a dog to become a facility dog in the Courthouse Dog program. During the final two weeks of the training, the person who will be the dog’s primary handler travels to the training facility and the two work together, becoming a team.

When on the job, a facility dog may work in a public area of a courthouse or in a courtroom. In addition, child advocacy centers and Court Appointed Special Advocates for Children programs use facility dogs during forensic interviews and in other situations to provide comfort and support for a child during a stress-filled event.

The case for using facility dogs in the courtroom continues to develop. Legislation authorizing the practice has been passed in Arkansas and Illinois. Appellate courts in multiple jurisdictions have upheld the use of a facility dog at trial. In 2014, the Supreme Court of the State of Washington held that a defendant’s right to fair trial was not violated when the King County trial court allowed facility dog Ellie to sit next to the developmentally disabled adult victim as he testified. Then in October 2015, Ohio’s Ninth District Court of Appeals affirmed the Summit County Prosecutor’s use of a facility dog during trial.

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Overwhelming scientific evidence exists about the physical and mental calming effects of purposely bred, appropriately trained dogs. Petting a dog can result in a decreased blood pressure or heart rate. In some instances, these changes can be brought about just by an individual seeing a dog.

O’Neill-Stephens’ vision, bolstered by law and science, is flourishing. As more people learn about the work of Courthouse Dog Foundation, the number of working facility dog teams increases. The dogs continue to work their magic and by doing so, fulfill a vision first conceived 2 years ago.

“Sean and Jeeter were the inspiration for this effort to make the legal system more humane,” she said. “This is my way of leaving the system better than I found it. Something we are not taught in law school is how stressful it is for witnesses – complaining witnesses in particular. It is possible to dial down the stress in an adversarial process.”

A boy and his dog, and the bond between the two, still inspire Ellen O’Neill-Stephens’ work. After years of educating and tens of thousands of miles on the road, she continues to advocate for justice with compassion. |SL|