

the  
**ALUMNI**  
Profile



**D**ayle Deardurff, '79, is the Executive Director of ProKids, one of the country's most successful Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) programs for guardian ad litem representation of children. It's hard to talk about Dayle without talking about her work with ProKids. Getting it right for children—accurate findings of fact, effective dispositions, careful follow through, permanence, safety, and even love—is what Dayle and her organization are about.

Dayle has been with ProKids since its inception and for most of her professional career, but her path to child advocacy was not entirely direct. Dayle worked in Washington, D.C., before coming to Omaha to attend Creighton Law School. She arrived in Omaha with a suitcase and a bicycle, no place to stay, and no familiarity with the Midwest. She does remember a tumbleweed rolling down Dodge

Street as a taxi took her from the airport to the law school.

Dayle settled in quickly, discovered she enjoyed the study of law enormously, and did well. Her second summer was spent as a clerk for the United States Attorney's Office in Lincoln. The experience was so satisfying that she went back as an intern the following fall. She describes her law school years as exciting and challenging; it is clear when she talks about her three years in Nebraska that she loved being a law student.

After graduating, Dayle returned to her home state, Ohio, spent a short time with a consumer advocacy agency for mentally retarded citizens, found she wanted to be in an independent practice, and left to form her own firm. While in solo practice, and in her second year out of law school, she was asked by a local judge, representing the Hamilton County Juvenile Court, and a local attorney, rep-

representing the Cincinnati Bar Association, to direct a new volunteer advocates' agency.

In September of 1981, with initial funding from the Cincinnati Junior League, ProKids opened its doors to Cincinnati children in legal need with Dayle as Executive Director and she has been making ProKids a success ever since.

ProKids is a non-profit corporation dedicated to providing high quality legal representation to children who are the subjects of child abuse or neglect actions in Cincinnati's juvenile courts. Just finishing its eleventh year of operation, ProKids has grown from a staff of three, including Dayle, plus the thirty volunteer advocates she trained, to a staff of twenty-three (and a half) plus almost a hundred trained volunteers.

Currently, nine lawyers and nine social workers handle a caseload that approaches 650 cases. Each case denotes a family; the actual number of children represented is much larger. By its tenth year, ProKids had served over 6500 children in need of legal representation and had trained over four hundred volunteers. Three full-time support staff and one half-time financial manager keep the office running efficiently. In addition, Dayle and her staff train, supervise, and support nearly a hundred current CASA volunteers, who serve as "the eyes and ears of the court, making independent, objective recommendations regarding the child-client's best interests."<sup>1</sup> While CASA volunteers are often not lawyers, they have access to legal counsel through their parent organizations; this is the model that ProKids uses.

The effect ProKids has had on children in Cincinnati and elsewhere in Ohio cannot be overestimated. In Dayle's

words, taken from the ProKids tenth annual report, "A Decade of Challenge and Change,"

I don't think any of us, 10 years ago, could have envisioned the successful impact our agency has had on this county. Today, the average number of children in the legal custody of the county and various child protection agencies at any given time is 2,300 fewer than it was 10 years ago.<sup>2</sup>

I had the pleasure of spending a day with Dayle recently, and I recorded the impressions that follow while I was at ProKids.

### *AT "ProKids"*

At 8:15 a.m., Dayle Deardurff and her staff begin the day at the ProKids office, stepping through a hazard of fresh poured cement and makeshift walkways. Construction is evident up and down the street; in front of the office building that houses ProKids, new brick is being laid in the place of an older cement sidewalk. This morning Dayle and her staff are gathering for their weekly office meeting. An office is quickly converted into

a conference room with chairs taken from every place they can be had. A local social work therapist has come in to talk with the ProKids lawyers and social workers about interviewing children. A child was recently discovered to have been abused in a foster home; the child had not disclosed the information for some time, despite having suffered ongoing abuse. The ProKids staff wants to know how to help its child-clients disclose this kind of information, and the questions flow freely during the therapist's presentation.

It is the quality and nature of the questions that are striking. Dayle is in the room with her staff, and they are asking questions that reveal their weaknesses. They talk openly about the times they feel they have failed in a particular way and ask for suggestions to avoid that in the future. They make recommendations to each other about practices and methods they have found helpful, and they look to the therapist for guidance.

Watching the interchanges that flow from the therapist's remarks, it becomes clear that the candor in the room is not in



spite of Dayle's presence, but because of it. Dayle creates an environment of trust and genuine interest in learning, which in turn allows her staff members to increase their skills, admit occasional defeats, and learn from each other.

There are other matters to attend to during the staff meeting, from the minor—Dayle announces that two rehabilitated bicycles have been donated and are available for clients—to the major: ProKids has contracted with the local county to handle 650 cases. The staff is handling close to that number, and care must be given not to exceed it. Because cases rarely close quickly, it has not taken long to accumulate that number of active cases. There is a clear need for more staff since there are many more Cincinnati children waiting for guardians ad litem. The next contract negotiated with the county should reflect that need.

Throughout the day, interchanges between staff and director continue to give evidence of Dayle's easy rapport with those who work with her and their trust in her judgment. At one point, a social worker asks for advice about a child-client threatening to run from her placement. The teenager's only real relationship appears to be with a boy she has come to

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know and feel affection for; he lives in another town. Dayle's solution is simple and sensible: ProKids will offer the foster parents payment for phone calls between them and will offer the boyfriend bus fare to visit for an afternoon from time to time, starting immediately. Saving the child's placement is important, but keeping her off the streets is paramount. If she runs, there will be nowhere for her to go but the streets.

Dayle says the small fund they keep at ProKids for discretionary use is a good example of staying flexible to meet the needs of their clients. Once money was given to a mother who had gone into hiding with her children. There was no real question of harm to the children, but the juvenile court judge wanted real assurances of the children's well-being. When contact was finally made with the mother, she agreed to bring the children to the courthouse in exchange for "Christmas Cash." She came with the children, who were fine, and the family actually had Christmas that year because of an innovative reverse bond payment from ProKids.

### **ON A PERSONAL NOTE**

Dayle's career at ProKids parallels her personal life. ProKids opened its doors three months to the day after her marriage to Paul Counts, Esq. And, one of her many successes at ProKids was a CASA volunteers and guardian ad litem training conference in May of 1987. Dayle's daughter Anna was born two weeks later and CASA volunteers and guardians across Ohio know Anna's age as well as Dayle does because of their recollections of that (very successful) conference.

## **CHALLENGES FOR THE FUTURE**

When asked what challenges still face her and ProKids, Dayle is quick to respond: Better wages and better benefits—medical and pension—for her staff. Child advocacy should not impoverish the advocates. ProKids has branched out in its fund-raising techniques, recently holding an auction of donated work by local artists, but funding for ProKids, as it is for most child advocate organizations, is still not enough for the tasks assigned it. Recall the 650 cases maximum workload about to be met.

That's the hard news. The good news is ProKids' dedication to children in need of legal services and its understanding that their futures depend upon what Dayle and her staff and volunteers do for those children who need ProKids.

For her work, Dayle received the prestigious CASA Program Director of the Year (1991) award made by the National CASA Association.

### *Way to go Dayle!*

by Professor Catherine M. Brooks

1. CASA: A Child's voice in the court. Seattle, WA: National CASA Association, undated.
2. Deardurff, Dayle D., ed., Pro-Kids X: The First Ten Years, "A Decade of Challenge and Change." Cincinnati, OH: Pro-Kids, 1991.