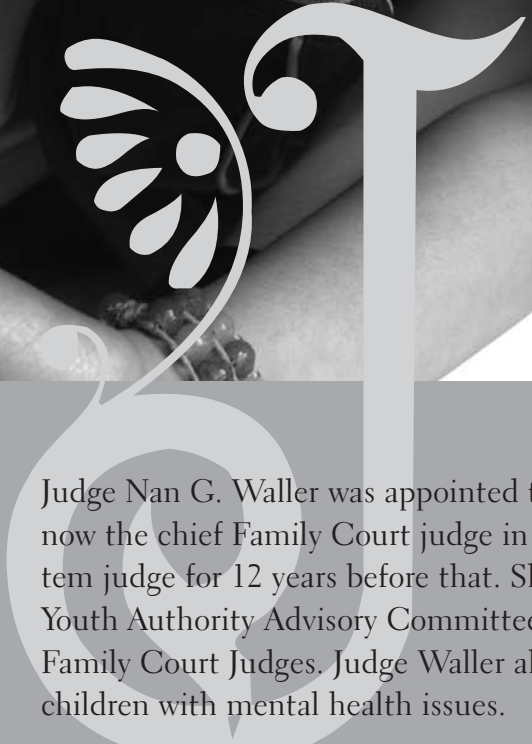




# all kids are our kids

Judge Nan G. Waller



Judge Nan G. Waller was appointed to the Multnomah County Circuit Court Bench in 2001 and is now the chief Family Court judge in Multnomah County. She served as a juvenile court referee/pro tem judge for 12 years before that. She serves on the Child Welfare Advisory Committee, the Oregon Youth Authority Advisory Committee, and committees of the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges. Judge Waller also chairs Wraparound Oregon, a community initiative to help children with mental health issues.

Peter Benson, in All Kids are Our Kids, writes:

“Our society is struggling to find its way in raising our children and youth. Instead of embedding our children in webs of sustained adult relationships, we segregate them from the wisdom and experience of adults, raising them in neighborhoods, institutions, and communities where few know their names. Instead of celebrating them as gifts of energy, passion, and hope, we view them with suspicion in public places and places of commerce, and deny them meaningful roles in community and civic life. Instead of fully investing in their growth and education as the promise of the future for society, we send them to underfunded, understaffed, and sometimes inattentive schools, child care centers, and afterschool programs. Then we wonder what went wrong when yet another youth crisis or tragedy hits the headlines.”

As the chief Family Court judge for Multnomah County, I strongly believe that we need to create a community where children have the support and the relationships with caring adults that they need. I see, first-hand, the consequences of the abdication by adults (including parents) of their responsibilities for our children. The core responsibility for raising our youth cannot lie in the hands of police officers, the courts, corrections facilities, or child welfare systems. Creating a community that truly values, protects, and pays attention to its children is the best preventive measure that we can take to assure that our children not only avoid risky behavior but, more importantly, thrive.

As a judge, I have responsibility for some of the loneliest children in the world. These are children who have grown up in foster care or have virtually raised themselves and have had little success in life. These are children who bounce around from program to program, have too many foster care placements, and whose strongest sense of connection is to the caseworkers, lawyers, and judges who manage their lives. Understandably, many of these children are angry, traumatized, and without any hope.

It is important for our community to identify the programs and processes that most effectively benefit the community and its members. It is in society’s best interest to find and utilize the best practices to help the children who, as a result of either delinquency or dependency, become wards of the court.

Two efforts, in this regard, stand out.

# One outcome of this initiative is that the kids in Wraparound, who used to move about four times a year, are moving about once a year.

## Take the Time

In 1997, Multnomah County retained Search Institute to find out how effectively we promote the 40 essential assets that youth need to thrive in today's world. Ten thousand students were surveyed and the key finding was as follows:

“Young people need more assets in every part of their lives, but most of all, they need more support from adults. Of the 40 assets, Multnomah County students have an average of only 19. Ideally every young person should have at least 30 of these 40 building blocks to help protect them from harm. Only 8 percent of youth surveyed have the full support they need. A look at five of the assets missing for many Multnomah County youth brings us to this sobering conclusion: more than anything young people lack adult support.”

The report went on to say,

“Every adult—not just parents and teachers—can do more to address these gaps. Three out of four youth sense that they are unwanted and unneeded in their community. Only one in four says that the adults in their life set a good example for them by helping other people or by refraining from dangerous behaviors. The message is clear: every adult needs to take the time to provide the support and guidance that young people lack.”

The Commission on Children, Families, and Community (CCFC) used those survey results to support the healthy development of youth in Multnomah County through the initiative Take the Time (T3), which focused on three over-arching assets:

- All children/youth have a relationship with at least one caring adult;
- Children/youth believe that they are valued by the community; and
- Children/youth have a productive role in the community.

One of Take the Time's greatest successes was to create strategic partnerships with the media that stimulated public awareness and shifted the focus from youth deficits to youth strengths. For example, The Oregonian ran a monthly piece

called “The Zone,” which not only gave youth a voice, but highlighted stories of young people doing good in and for the community.

Although budget cuts ended Take the Time as an initiative, the messages of Take the Time, that children need to be valued by the community and sustained by adult attention, endure in homes, schools, and the actions of individuals throughout our community.

## Wraparound Oregon

Some of the children who come before the juvenile court confront every system that has responsibility for them. These are children with significant mental health and behavioral issues who are involved in multiple child caring systems: child welfare, education, juvenile justice, and mental health. For this group of high-needs, complex children, success is often elusive. They rapidly cycle through multiple placements and schools and often end up hospitalized or in detention. Significant resources are poured into them, with little positive outcome. The efforts to help become part of the problem. No child can move through dozens of placements, a dozen schools, and multiple therapists unscathed. This instability leads to uncoordinated, fragmented, duplicative services that are ineffective at best and too often magnify the problem.

In 2004, a small group of state and local leaders, realizing the need to improve outcomes for this particular class of high-needs children, established an innovative solution called Wraparound Oregon, based on a model program initially developed in Milwaukie, Wisconsin. Wraparound Oregon brings together the child-serving agencies that work with high-needs children and families, and provides a framework for their cooperation and collaboration.

Wraparound Oregon enables the many involved agencies and the families of these children to work together as a team to create one plan, whose components work together to stabilize and support the child. Since its inception, 53 children have participated. At present there are 40 children in the school-age program. These cases are reviewed periodically by a judge.

For example, one youth who entered the Wraparound pilot

program had been in 33 foster and institutional placements between the ages of 9 and 16. Chaos and turmoil dominated his life and traditional approaches were not working. However, when he became involved with Wraparound, his Wraparound facilitator was able to assist his team in creating one coordinated plan that resulted in a stabilized living situation and significantly improved his behavior and school attendance, to the extent that he is now a varsity football player at his school.

One outcome of this initiative is that the kids in Wraparound, who used to move about four times a year, are moving about once a year. An objective of the program is also to reduce the use of institutional-based care centers and inpatient psychiatric hospitals while providing more services in the community and in the child's home.

The strengths-based component of Wraparound Oregon is worth noting. After years of being "treated," many youth who enter Wraparound are jaded and non-compliant. For example, one girl resisted taking her psychotropic medication and refused to engage meaningfully in her treatment plan. When the Wraparound facilitator shifted the dynamic, from treating the girl as a problem to allowing her to participate in the planning for her services and activities, her non-compliance shifted as well. She completed drug treatment and stopped using drugs. She began taking her medication, and started to trust that people were listening to her and understanding her needs. On one of her visits to my court I asked her what caused her to change. She said that before no one would listen to her so she would just say no, but once someone actually listened and paid attention, she felt that she might as well listen too. The plan that the facilitator came up with was one that she felt could work with.

Wraparound engages with families in a way that is highly effective. Wraparound Oregon uses an approach that recognizes family members as:


- experts in their particular situation;
- co-participants in the process;
- often their children's best advocates; and
- vital contributors to their child's long-term success.

There are times when there is no family available, but even then, Wraparound Oregon recognizes children's innate need for attachment and connection.

There are times when there is no family available, but even then, Wraparound Oregon recognizes children's innate need for attachment and connection. "Jason" was a boy who had dreamed of being a regular baseball-playing kid, but had endured years of out-of-state moves, a failed adoption, and significant parental neglect. His diagnoses included chronic post-traumatic stress disorder, reactive attachment disorder, and oppositional defiant disorder. Psychiatrists predicted lifelong institutionalization.

Wraparound team members went to work on Jason's behalf, moving him into a foster home, and finding a long-lost relative. The relative became involved in Jason's life, signed him up for baseball, and began taking him to practice every week. Before long, he became an "all-star" baseball player. Through the hard work of the Wraparound Oregon education advocate, Jason's Wraparound Oregon team, and his new foster father, he entered public school and was identified as "talented and gifted."

Over the next 18 months I closely monitored Jason's progress, and a few months ago I closed his case and assigned permanent custody to his foster father. Jason was the first Wraparound Oregon case and one of several stories that reinforce Peter Benson's urgent charge: all kids are our kids.

Our community needs to continue to strive to protect and help our most vulnerable members—our children. As a judge, I have been privileged to observe and participate in some innovative efforts to do just that. I am optimistic that the lessons of Take the Time and Wraparound Oregon will help us assure that all of our children have what they need in their lives to thrive. 

To learn more about Wraparound Oregon, please visit: [www.wraparoundoregon.org](http://www.wraparoundoregon.org).

