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The Dead Eyes Of Children Are Haunting, Sad

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When you talk about Florida's children, or at least what we do for them, it is so easy to have low expectations.

Florida is the American dream in so many ways. It is from here that we first went to the moon. We have that magnificent coastline. We offer a playground of sprawling theme parks and the natural beauty of rivers and forests.

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In Florida, you can travel in minutes from culturally diverse cities to subtropical splendor.

For all of that, you also can look at almost any list, any survey, about the state of children in Florida, and you will be appalled.

You name it - education, safety, health care, juvenile justice, nutrition, foster care - and you will find Florida's children wallowing at or near the bottom nationally.

The institutions and programs designed to protect and nurture children in this state are embarrassingly inadequate. They seem to lurch from one disaster to the next crisis, never really making a dent in the situation.

You wonder how that can be. How can a state where politicians spew vast clouds of gaseous oratory about how they are fighting to improve education and child welfare still manage to sink ever deeper into the muck.

Putting It Together

It's not for lack of programs with great-sounding names, such as "KidCare" and "A- Plus" education. Maybe that's why I was a little less than enthusiastic when I was invited to a fundraising effort for something called "Florida's Children First!"

The purpose of the organization is to protect the legal rights of at-risk children, especially those caught up in Florida's foster care system. The idea is that lawyers will take on the myriad layers of government and the courts.

Gerald Glynn is the organization's director. He has spent the past 13 years teaching law students about child advocacy.

"We're still putting it all together," he said the other day, "but we have trained 162 attorneys, and we are working to build a comprehensive network."

“We’ve already had some successes. We were instrumental in bringing to light some of the problems of the foster care independent living programs. We’ve managed to get some focus on programs for older foster youth.

“I think our biggest success is pushing to get a piece of legislation through last year that opened up some of the records of foster children. We are trying to help police access to those records of children who are missing as well as giving that access to the attorneys representing those children.”

Life, But No Hope

The organization has handed out a few awards, including one to **Bob Dillinger, the public defender in Pasco and Pinellas counties.**

Everything I’ve heard about **Dillinger** is good, including his approach to juvenile justice, which is to send in his more experienced lawyers to take on cases that too often get less than the full attention of the courts.

It was **Dillinger** who had the line about looking “into the dead eyes of children.”

“You don’t know how frustrating it is,” he said, “to see kids from dysfunctional families who have lost hope. They have life but they have no hope in their heart. You stare at them and all you see are those dead eyes looking in your direction.”

Dillinger, like so many, preaches early intervention and prevention, but he sees the numbers and the caseloads piling up.

“There aren’t easy solutions,” he concedes, “but until there are no more dead eyes staring at me, I am going to try.”

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