

# Choosing to Stay and Fight For Kids in Trouble



“What happened in your life that made you a passionate advocate for kids?”

When Jane Hansen, Information Officer for the [Georgia Supreme Court](#), asked me this question last week during an interview, I thought, “Whoa – the question assumed something happened to me.”

Now I am paranoid – what does she know that I don’t? I have known Jane going way back to my days as a parole officer when she was a reporter for the [Atlanta Journal Constitution](#) – she has a keen sense of things.

This “happening” resides in the recesses of my mind, something that rises to the surface from time to time when triggered by an event, song, or a question.

My Dad’s work transferred us to a small town in Kansas between my third and fourth grade years. It was the first day of school – I was nervous more than most on the first day – I didn’t know anyone.

We started the day with the Pledge of Allegiance. I noticed a boy sitting toward the front who remained seated during the

pledge. He didn't utter a word. The teacher to my amazement didn't admonish him to stand and take part.

As it goes with kids, I had bigger worries on my first day and soon forgot about this act of defiance – until the next day. Again the boy didn't stand. Now I was getting curiously frustrated in that 10-year-old way. Why does he get to stay seated while the rest of us have to stand? That's not fair I thought to myself. I was getting angry.

Consider what we were going through in those years of the Cold War. It was circa 1966. During school, we would sometimes be paraded out of class and into the hallways when the "attack" bell sounded. Then we would stand face forward to the wall with our hands behind our heads. All this was in hopes of surviving the impact and aftermath of the impact of a nuclear missile bearing the hammer and sickle of the Soviet Union.

In my world at age 10, this boy was a communist sympathizer!

It turns out I wasn't the only one who thought this.

When school let out that day, I ran into what I thought at first glance was a schoolyard fight. But no, it was three boys beating and kicking the communist sympathizing "he deserves to get his butt kicked" Pledge-of-Allegiance-refusing student.

In my state of confusion, I didn't know whether to stand there or run away? I certainly wasn't thinking about helping a communist!

In my moment of indecision I hesitated just long enough to look down and see this boy's face, and then his eyes made contact with mine. In what seemed like minutes, he reached out his hand to me with tears flowing from his eyes and said with a screeching cry, "Help me."

I ran!

I kept running until I reached that one safe place – my

bedroom.

My Mom noticed at dinner that I was quiet and asked me if I was OK. I told her I was fine, but I couldn't get the boy's plea for help out of my head. I finally spoke up and told her about the boy and how he refused to stand and pledge the flag. I asked her if he was a communist.

"No," she replied. "He is a Jehovah Witness."

Mom explained that the boy wasn't disrespectful, but that his Christian beliefs forbid saluting.

"Jehovah Witnesses are very respectful of government," she explained. "They pay taxes and obey the laws," but what Mom said next pierced my heart.

"In his world of thinking he is placing the flag above God. No person should be forced to suffer that trauma."

I went to bed that night mulling over my Mom's words. The more I looked at it through the boy's eyes, the more I felt guilty and ashamed. Guilty for assuming he was bad, ashamed for running.

He was beaten to a pulp because he was different and it didn't matter even if he was a commie. He didn't deserve to be beaten.

I cried that night and Mom heard it. She came in and I told her the rest of the story of my shame and guilt. She held me in her arms and said she was proud that I felt ashamed and counseled me to do something about it.

I promised myself that night – alone and crying in the bedroom – that I would never run again. And so, I made friends with that boy.

It was difficult to re-live that moment with Jane – my voice breaking, cracking, and my fingers pressing against my watery

eyes to hold back a complete break-down. But I've always known that it defined my existence to be an advocate.

I chose my path of advocacy at age 15. I knew then I would go to law school. I have traveled a road that has taken me to a place that many think unlikely for an advocate – the judicial bench. After all, judges wear robes and sit on a bench, hear evidence, respond to objections, decide cases, research the law, and draft orders – what more is there to judging?

The answer, I think, depends on what that judge decides to do when he or she takes off the robe. The key question is, “What can I do off the bench to become more effective on the bench?” After all, the Judicial Canons encourage us to “engage in activities to improve the law, the legal system, and the administration of justice.”

I don't have to leave my Georgia backyard to find judicial advocates working to improve juvenile justice in their communities through collaboration and innovative programming. But only so much can be done without the resources needed to make a difference in the lives of kids with childhood trauma leading to delinquent behaviors.

Gov. Nathan Deal is cognizant of these limitations and wants change that will tear down the walls that keep us moving forward. So, he created a reform council and gave them the tools to delve keenly into what works and what doesn't – analysts from the [Pew Trust Center](#) and [Annie E. Casey Foundation](#).

No matter how it turns out, I am thankful for my governor's leadership to seek reform, my colleagues on the council for their dedication, and my fellow Georgia judges for their “off the bench” advocacy.

At least I know we are not running from kids in trouble. We are staying to fight!