



TENNESSEE JUSTICE CENTER

Advocates for Families in Need

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Dear Friend of the Tennessee Justice Center,

“Leap and the net will appear.” By itself, that’s a formula for disaster. But, with the generosity of friends and the kindness of strangers, leaps of faith can also produce wonderful results.

An event this week made this point forcefully. The Tennessee Justice Center just held a major fundraising dinner, the first ever for the organization. The Nashville event brought together friends, funders, clients and good natured former adversaries. It was a humorous affair, and my haphazard management and often hapless lawyering offered a rich lode of comic material that friends were able to mine to great effect.

The funny stories made a more serious point, though. Everyone who attended was there because they knew that TJC has been stalwart in its advocacy for vulnerable Tennesseans, and because they recognized that TJC has touched literally hundreds of thousands of lives over the years. That has happened, in spite of the missteps, pratfalls and ill-considered leaps that friends recounted so mercilessly, because TJC has always been held up by a net knitted and held fast by many hundreds of generous, compassionate hands.

Time and again TJC has responded to compelling human needs by taking a leap and hoping against hope that a net would appear. That was the story in 1996, when TJC opened its doors and took on big cases before it had received even a single donation or grant. TJC was founded with a broad mandate to advocate for Tennessee’s poorest families and children in the toughest cases affecting their most critical human needs. Within months, friends and strangers had come forward with funding to keep TJC vital, and the generosity has not slackened since.

TJC repeatedly took leaps of faith when it partnered with former adversaries to help craft public policies affecting vulnerable families statewide. Our trust was rewarded by policies and programs that improved the care of the frail elderly in nursing homes, that broadened medical coverage for children and that helped families transition from welfare to work. Those were all results that TJC helped make happen, but that we could never have achieved without the creativity and dedication of our adversaries-turned-collaborators.

Another net appeared a few years ago when we found ourselves defending court orders in class actions that protected the health care of 1.3 million adults and children. Facing the massed legal firepower of state government and its managed care contractors, TJC was hopelessly out-resourced. When we were on the ropes, friends recruited more friends, who recruited strangers (who soon became friends), and together they joined the fight on our side. Over seven years, our pro bono co-counsel donated \$17 million of world class legal talent, assuring TJC’s clients effective representation, and enabling us to safeguard constitutional rights that are the birthright of all Americans.

Upon passage of the Affordable Care Act three years ago, TJC committed itself to trying to ensure that, in spite of the health reform law's shortcomings and the resistance of many elected officials, the benefits of health reform would reach the hundreds of thousands of uninsured Tennessee families that so desperately need its benefits. Once nearly alone in that effort, TJC is now only one part, albeit a crucial part, of a statewide network involving thousands of congregations, nonprofits and health care professionals.

This week's fundraising event was itself a leap of sorts. TJC faced a serious budget gap, but there was no way that our staff could put together a major fundraiser without neglecting client service. As if by magic, creative, dedicated volunteers suddenly materialized, and generous friends stepped forward to underwrite and host the event. They made the impossible happen, while TJC staff stayed focused on serving clients. We were moved beyond words by what they accomplished, and by the sight of revered clients who had traveled hours to attend the event and celebrate TJC's work.

What the friends, donors, former adversaries and clients came together to celebrate this week was not TJC's dedicated staff and volunteers, or a particular legal victory. Most people probably know few staff or volunteers and have only a general knowledge of TJC's advocacy record.

What we all share, however, is a commitment to the ideal that TJC serves. It is an ideal that finds special expression in America's founding documents, but that is ultimately rooted in our most ancient faiths:

Every life is sacred. Everyone matters.

For that reason, everybody deserves a voice in matters that most affect their lives and the lives of those they love. Ignoring the voices of any of us diminishes all of us.

TJC tries, often imperfectly but always with heart, to be a voice for those of our neighbors who cannot speak for themselves and who are most in need. That is why even those with whom we have sharply differed on particular issues so generously joined in last Tuesday's celebration of TJC's mission. The ideal that TJC serves belongs to us all.

That is why I am confident that TJC can continue to leap when necessary, knowing that many hands will be there to provide a net. In January, I will transfer leadership to the more capable hands of TJC's co-founder, Michele Johnson, and I look forward to continuing full time in a new role as a TJC staff attorney. Reflecting on the past 18 years, I am overwhelmed with gratitude to the thousands of friends and strangers who have sustained TJC so faithfully and who continue to hold the net. Thank you so much!

Best regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Gordon Bonnyman". The signature is fluid and cursive, written in a professional style.

Gordon Bonnyman