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Putting Children First

Howard Talenfeld



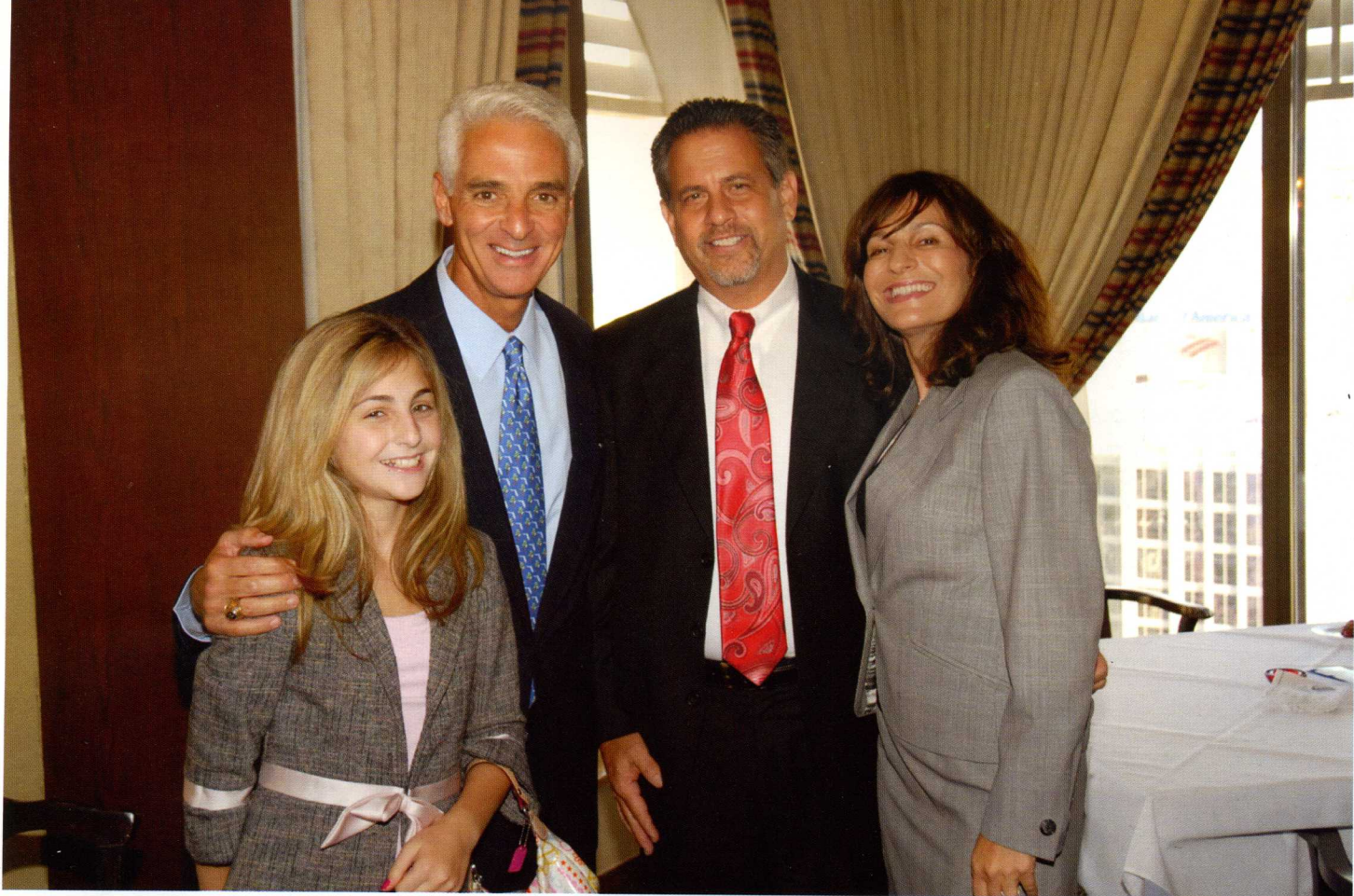
Howard Talenfeld

Making His Mark

by Lori Meyers

Howard Talenfeld has a unique understanding of vulnerable children. That coupled with his acumen as a lawyer, a child-advocate, a father, and as the eldest sibling of a sister with a disability has given him a passion for making a difference. For more than two decades, Howard has invested his life's work to improve the lives of thousands of vulnerable children and families, throughout Florida.

He has a thorough understanding of the emotional and physical toll that bringing up a child with serious physical, mental and emotional challenges has on a family, as well as the limited choices that it has in providing adequate care with dignity for their child. He knows this, because his youngest sister Bess, now forty two, was born with a developmental disability.



Governor Charlie Crist with Talenfelds

As a youngster, he always pitched in. While doing so, Howard studied the moves that his parents made as they created an "intergenerational model" by involving each member of the family and giving them responsibility for taking care of Bess. The infrastructure that Howard's parents built for their youngest child, is still in tact. Howard's oldest sister, Ellen became a special education teacher and Howard and his brother, Mitchell visit her regularly and include her in every way possible. Bess is the god-mother for Howard's son Eric. "To this day, everyone has their role with Bess, and none of us would have it any other way" Howard insists. Because of their support, Bess is able to live somewhat independently. She holds a job and fends for herself on many levels. The family has helped make her independent and while the support they provide is comprehensive, Bess feels confident and fulfilled in her life, unlike others who may not have been given that opportunity. And this intergenerational model is what Howard believes in and what he knows is necessary.

As a partner with the Broward law firm Colodny, Fass Talenfeld, Karlinsky and Abate, his unique perspective helped give Howard the passion and the opportunity to represent the State of Florida in several class action law suits pertaining to the foster care system, the children's mental health system, the juvenile justice system, state psychiatric hospitals and the provision of Medicaid services to the developmentally disabled. Howard had an interesting and very analytical way of looking at Florida's system and decided early on that rather than fight a system that wasn't working, he would spend his time identifying its problems and finding effective

solutions. "In my work" says Howard, "I learned the common threads that faced all of these kids and began to put together a plan on how to improve the system." At this time the state was running inadequate facilities that were housing these kids. That is when I realized they (the facilities) needed to be vastly improved. "I defended the state's right to fix the system," explains Howard. "I decided then, that advocates were the only ones who would assure that vulnerable children were not taken advantage of in any way while in the state's care."

With knowledge behind him and tact in hand, Howard devised a plan that improved the faulty system that was in place. In 1997, Howard worked with the Youth Law Center to represent some of our communities neediest children and families directly, and after winning a landmark case (Ward Vs. Kearny), they got Broward County's child Welfare budget almost tripled.

And all of this has been a catalyst for the creation of a statewide non-profit legal services entity dedicated to protecting and assisting children who are in foster care and in delinquency systems.

The organization is Florida's Children First (FCF) and today it is probably the single most effective agency that works on behalf of children in the entire state. With assistance from the Florida Bar Foundation, attorneys, child advocates and others who lend their time and talent to ensure that at-risk children will have a voice that is heard when decisions are made for them. FCF does its primary work with children in state custody.

As founding President and Chairman of the Board for Florida's Children First, Howard has been able to articulate the message that "foster kids have rights too." The creation of FCF is invaluable and since its inception in 2001, it is known as the "go-to advocacy group" when it comes to drafting or advocating for passage of legislation to assist the vulnerable population in Florida. FCF has increased the amount of time spent on issues related to this population and has been a clearing-house for thousands of pro-bono legal service hours.

"The creation of FCF is invaluable", says Nan Rich, who is recognized as one of Florida's leading champions of children's issues. "As far as statewide advocacy, Howard has had the vision to start a group that has increased the effectiveness of our state's role in handling vulnerable children's issues," she adds. "As a legislator, I know how hard it is to get people's attention in Tallahassee, and Howard has had the tenacity to demonstrate the need and willingness to go out and get it done!" she continues, "As a result FCF is one of the most effective advocacy organization that there are in Tallahassee, Nan boasts.

Andrea Moore, an attorney herself as well as a child advocate in Tallahassee for years is FCF Executive Director. "Howard brings a unique perspective, having worked both inside and outside the state system," she explains. "His vision in bringing together advocates to create FCF has made a huge difference for children in Florida....." she continues "some lawyers right a wrong for a particular client, Howard wants to put himself out of business by improving children's services so that no more children will be harmed." she adds.

The dedicated support that FCF brings to children throughout the state ensures that a guardian, or an attorney is available for all children as needed.

FCF also provides educational advocacy meaning that children are provided bus transportation to their original schools, despite frequent moves of their home placement. This creates some critical continuity for the child during a time where there is almost none. During the last five years, FCF has helped increase our guardian

Ad Litem budget for children from twelve million to thirty million dollars. This funding has more than doubled the number of Guardians Ad Litem in Florida who represent children, improve public awareness and file amicus briefs as strategies to improve child-serving systems. More funding allows recruitment, training and support for those, who ultimately become "the voice of the child."

Howard's personal life changed when he was introduced to Boardroom Communications President, Julie Silver. Prior to their even being formally introduced, Julie sat on the FCF Board of Directors, where Howard served as President. As fate would have it, several of their friends made the formal introduction and the rest is history. Howard and Julie were married almost two years ago. "Julie is my perfect partner" Howard beams, "she has the same passion for helping others that I do." As President of Boardroom Communications, Inc. Julie is quite philanthropic herself as part of her business endeavors, she donates her Public Relation's expertise to a number of Broward nonprofits including Broward legal Aid, Temple Kol Ami, Balance Magazines' Work Life Institute and of course Florida's Children First.

A second marriage for both of them, the couple has blended their lives and their passions and as the Dream Team they do great things together. Howard and Julie sponsored Jafco's Annual Chanukkah party this year. The couple works to instill their passion for giving and their selfless nature into their children individually and now as a family. This year the family dedicated and named the basketball courts at Temple Kol Ami Emanuel in honor of Julie's late husband, Terry Zobel.

Howard's daughter Brett formed the first drill team for developmentally disabled boys and girls in Tamarac called the Bull Dogs. The team now competes in the Special Olympics and at high school events with other drill teams.

For those who want to join the Talenfelds in helping children have a safe haven join them on February 14th at Nova Southeastern University for their Broward County Reception. For more information call Andrea L. Moore at 954.796.0860 or phone Howard directly at 954.492.4010. **EL**

Howard with Senator Nan Rich



Howard with wife Julie



Howard with Senator Skip Campbell

