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Joe Surkiewicz: UB Law's Urban Child Symposium to focus on trauma

by Joe Surkiewicz

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A quarter of children in the U.S. experience or witness a traumatic event before age four. And the number is nearly nine in 10 for children in the juvenile justice system.

But few of them are ever identified as traumatized. And even fewer get appropriate treatment or attention.

To examine the issue of childhood trauma, especially for urban children — and to offer solutions to help victims — the University of Baltimore School of Law's Center for Families, Children and the Courts is presenting a conference on April 4, "A Holistic Approach to the Urban Child's Trauma: From the Eyes of the Beholder."

The conference series, now in its fifth year, "has hit a nerve," said Barbara Babb, director of the center and an associate professor at UB Law.

"People want to talk about the issues faced by urban children," Babb said. "Previous conferences have focused on school dropouts, health, juvenile justice and child welfare. In this symposium, the focus is trauma. We're attending to an urgent need to learn and talk about those issues."

Trauma is defined broadly as physical, emotional and psychological damage, Babb said: "We will have people speaking who have experienced trauma. Our keynote speaker is singer, actress and producer Rain Pryor, who will talk about her personal experience with trauma."

The luncheon keynote speakers are Nancy and Anthony Green, whose daughter, Deanna, was electrocuted at Druid Hill Park when the 14-year-old touched a metal fence that was electrically "live" due to a nearby faulty cable. The couple recently settled a lawsuit they filed against the city of Baltimore.

"They'll talk about the tragedy of losing a child and the triumph of passing legislation dealing with stray electrical voltage in Maryland, Rhode Island and Florida," Babb said. "The Greens also have established a scholarship foundation in their daughter's name."

In addition to the keynote speakers, the conference will consist of three panels. The first panel, "Setting the Stage," will feature three professionals who work directly with traumatized children.

Risa Garon, the founder and executive director of the National Family Resiliency Center, works with children's and family's mental health outcomes during and after separation and divorce. "It's a remarkable center that's very child-focused and works with children who are experiencing trauma at various stages of their development," Babb said.

Thomas M. Scalea, founder of the R Adams Cowley Shock Trauma Center and the Francis X. Kelly Professor Trauma Surgery at the University of Maryland School of Medicine, will talk about the 2,000 patients each year who enter Shock Trauma after sustaining injuries from inter-

personal violence. “He has started a violence intervention program that he’ll talk about,” Babb said.

Elizabeth Thompson, assistant vice president and director of Kennedy Krieger’s Family Center, works with people who have experienced complex interpersonal trauma. “She’ll talk about treatments that work,” Babb noted.

The second panel will focus on childhood trauma, the law and the justice system and will feature Baltimore Police Commissioner Anthony W. Batts, Baltimore City Circuit Judge Yvette M. Bryant (the judge-in-charge of the court’s family division) and Melanie D. Shapiro, chief attorney of the Maryland Public Defender’s juvenile court division.

The third panel will examine childhood trauma, the law and society. Nicole Harris-Crest, a third-year UB Law student, will talk about her father, Ken Harris, a Baltimore City councilman and a victim of gunfire.

The other panelists: Rhonda Lipkin, the independent verification agent on the L.J. v. Dallas consent decree (which regulates the foster care system in Baltimore); Lori Mostofsky, a social worker in the psychiatry unit of the Johns Hopkins Children’s Center; and Karen Webber-Ndour, executive director of student support services in the Baltimore City public schools.

“The speakers will promote and offer strategies that help children suffering from particular types of trauma,” Babb said. “The law can lift ideas from non-lawyers. All panelists will present examples about how the court can be therapeutic in its approach to dealing with children suffering from trauma.

“We at the Center for Families, Children and the Courts advocate that there needs to be a court-community connection,” she continued. “That’s why we’re bringing in the police commissioner and people in the community who work directly with children who are traumatized.”

Because the problem of childhood trauma is only getting worse.

“The state of the economy puts tremendous stresses on families and they often act out in ways that are harmful to children,” Babb added.

Seats for the April 4 symposium (which were free) are no longer available. However, the center will make the conference available online.

“We always podcast the symposium on our website within a couple weeks,” Babb said. “We also post any PowerPoints used by our speakers. We try to make as much available as possible to the public.”

To review the symposium podcast, visit the center’s website: <http://law.ubalt.edu/centers/cfcc>.

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