‘A Champion for Children’: Juvenile Justice Improvements are Hallmark of Justice Kimball’s Career

By Kären A. Hallstrom

There is perhaps no greater calling in the legal profession than to improve the administration of justice for our most vulnerable citizens. During the course of her formidable career, Louisiana Supreme Court Chief Justice Catherine D. (Kitty) Kimball has passionately and persistently pursued better outcomes for children, youth and families in Louisiana.

As a lawyer, a judge, a justice and Chief Justice, and as an active member of numerous committees, task forces, commissions and associations, Justice Kimball has maintained a keen awareness of the impact of the judicial system on the young and disenfranchised and has demonstrated outstanding leadership for systemic reform efforts and unceasing energy to participate fully in them. She has understood when change was needed, advocated for it, endured the forces of resistance and embraced the promise of a better future. A comprehensive accounting of all Justice Kimball’s accomplishments on behalf of children would be voluminous; she has spent most of her life caring for children, her own — as a mother and grandmother — as well as for countless others who have benefitted from her compassion and concern.
For example, in 1997, Justice Kimball initiated the Sunshine Project, which undertook the writing and dissemination of a special book called “You Are Sunshine.” Since then, this book has been provided to every kindergarten child in Louisiana in an effort to build and support their self-esteem.

Justice Kimball has been particularly attentive to the needs of children in the court system and has sought ways to effectively address those needs. She has recognized the value of specialized training, of learning and applying best practices and of being intentional and data driven, and has supported implementation of programs and initiatives accordingly. She provided leadership as the Court accepted responsibility for statewide efforts such as the Supreme Court's CASA Assistance Program, FINS Assistance Program and Drug Court Program.

John Wyble, executive director of Louisiana CASA, said, “Justice Kimball has long advocated with passion and determination to make Louisiana a better place for all children. Her leadership and support of CASA has ensured that thousands of children in foster care have had a CASA volunteer speak up in court for their best interests. She is truly a champion for children.”

Justice Kimball also has been the lead justice for the Louisiana Court Improvement Program, overseeing such initiatives as the CIP Judicial Fellowship and the creation of a center of excellence for children and families.

As Justice Kimball explained to the Legislature last year, “[T]he center is yet another demonstration of our recognition that it is our collective responsibility that we, in all of our roles — whether judicial, executive, legislative, public, private, local or state — should apply what we’ve learned, and base our policies, procedures and budgets on what has shown to improve outcomes for our children.” She has encouraged and supported development of an integrated juvenile justice information system, and she was instrumental in facilitating the new statewide system of legal representation in child protection cases. When necessary, she has encouraged — and sometimes mandated — statewide judicial training on issues impacting children, such as the Adoption and Safe Families Act and waiver of counsel by juveniles.

"I have the deepest admiration for my dear friend, Chief Justice Kitty Kimball, who served the people of Louisiana with dignity and class in and out of the courtroom. Few troubled children of Louisiana will ever understand the effort and commitment Justice Kimball made on their behalf. We owe her a deep debt of gratitude for turning the juvenile justice system away from one that put young people into prison programs designed for adult offenders, effectively training them for a life of crime.

She inspired me and others to provide incarcerated children with quality, age-appropriate educational programs. This approach has resulted in turning those same troubled children into productive adults while reducing recidivism rates.

Thank you, Chief Justice Kimball, for your trailblazing work. Louisiana appreciates you and is a better state for having you on its Supreme Court."

— Kathleen Babineaux Blanco
Louisiana Governor, 2004-08

Hon. Madeleine M. Landrieu, a judge on the 4th Circuit Court of Appeal, appreciates the judicial role model Justice Kimball has been. “The Chief’s leadership in the area of juvenile justice cannot be overstated. Her contributions in this area will live on well beyond her retirement. Those of us serving in the judiciary should grab the baton as she passes it to us, and work hard every day to ensure that children are not needlessly sent from schools to the juvenile justice system, and are not removed from abusive homes only to be left to wander through the maze of our foster care system. We should never stop fighting her fight — the fight for the children of our state.”

Justice Kimball’s leadership has extended beyond the courts to others who have a profound impact on the lives of children, including legislators, government/agency leaders and law enforcement. She has demonstrated a remarkable ability to work effectively with a succession of Louisiana administrations and legislatures, as well as with various federal agencies, national foundations and juvenile justice and child welfare professionals from many different states.

In her 2009 judiciary address to the Joint Session of the House and Senate, Justice Kimball openly acknowledged that the juvenile justice system was a subject very dear to her heart and urged the legislators to continue moving forward with the reforms that had been made. Again in 2011, her remarks to the joint session included references to her interest and involvement in juvenile justice and child welfare reform efforts. She specifically asked for the Legislature’s “continued support and assistance for our children.”

U.S. Sen. Mary Landrieu said, “As Kitty prepares to retire in January, I commend her for her years of service to our state and for her unwavering commitment to the Louisiana Constitution. She became known for collaborating with the Legislature and working well with Republican and Democratic governors alike. Most significantly, she became known for making strides in juvenile justice and she has a deep understanding of the effects that
Over the last decade, Louisiana juvenile justice has undergone much-needed systemic change, brought about by the efforts of people determined to provide better conditions and services for Louisiana youth. No one recognized the need for improvement more than Chief Justice Catherine (Kitty) Kimball.

Justice Kimball has given much to Louisiana, the children of our state, and the Office of Juvenile Justice (OJJ) in particular. Kitty Kimball championed the cause of reforming the state’s juvenile justice system. The state Legislature created the Juvenile Justice Implementation Commission as the chief vehicle for reform and Justice Kimball proudly served as a dedicated member. She has spent untold time and effort working to transform the entire continuum of juvenile justice services throughout the state, to provide more effective services for Louisiana’s at-risk youth.

I can think of no one in Louisiana who has consistently worked harder to improve conditions for Louisiana’s most fragile youth and their families. The state of Louisiana and OJJ owe an incalculable debt of gratitude to Chief Justice Kimball for giving voice to a dire need and her unending efforts to make life better for the most vulnerable of our citizens.

—Dr. Mary L. Livers
Deputy Secretary, Louisiana Office of Juvenile Justice

an innovative tool to measure and track health and well-being outcomes of children across the state. Louisiana’s kids will always have an ally and an advocate in Kitty Kimball.”

For several years, Justice Kimball served as an active member of the Louisiana Children’s Cabinet and was an instrumental commissioner on the Juvenile Justice Reform Implementation Commission. She worked closely with the MacArthur Foundation and the Casey Foundation on juvenile justice reform efforts, and cajoled countless judges and legislators to take the trip to Missouri to see for themselves what an effective and efficient system could look like.

Laurie R. Garduque, MacArthur’s director of Justice Reform, recalls Justice Kimball’s role: “When we were first thinking about Louisiana as a potential Models for Change state, we wanted to see where the leadership would come from, and who would inspire and motivate the state to go faster and further in juvenile justice reform — we knew leadership would be critical. When we met Justice Kimball, we were convinced and persuaded that Louisiana was one of our states. Seven years later, the evidence bears us out. Justice Kimball was critical in bringing together the collaboration and vision that makes us proud of what Louisiana has accomplished, and gives us confidence that Louisiana will continue to move forward in the future.”

David W. Burton, district attorney in the 36th Judicial District and chair of the Louisiana District Attorneys Association Juvenile Justice Task Force, is one of the many juvenile justice professionals who have worked closely with the Chief on system improvement for more than 10 years. He and his colleagues have seen Justice Kimball as an effective voice for thoughtful, meaningful reform. “Chief Justice Kimball has been a true
‘Champion of Juvenile Justice Reform,’ dedicated to the concept that safeguarding our citizens is consistent with a juvenile justice program based upon a therapeutic model, with positive behavior modification as its goal,” Burton said. “She has remained steadfast in her advocacy for Juvenile Justice Reform, with the belief that early intervention is a key component of the larger criminal justice system. While we are saddened by the news of her retirement, we are heartened by her continued advocacy for reform, and happy that she will have the opportunity to spend more time with her family, to enjoy her retirement with the satisfaction of a job well done.”

The myriad accomplishments and awards for Justice Kimball’s work on behalf of children are far too numerous to recount here. In the last few months, she was presented with the first “Champion of Louisiana Juvenile Justice” Award by the Office of Juvenile Justice for advocating reform of the state’s juvenile justice system.

Dr. Debra K. DePrato, project director of the MacArthur Foundation’s Louisiana Models for Change program and director of the Institute for Public Health and Justice at LSUHSC, explains: “Justice Kimball is not afraid to look at the system and do better. She embraces change and is always looking for the betterment of Louisiana’s youth. She is inspiring to all who are working in the juvenile justice realm in Louisiana. She is our champion and leader and demonstrates this time and again.”

Justice Kimball is equally lauded among child welfare stakeholders. She was the recipient of the 2012 Together We Can “Lifetime Achievement Award,” presented each year to an individual who has demonstrated an enduring commitment to serving Louisiana’s children and families.

Louisiana Commissioner of Administration Kristy Nichols said, “Chief Justice Kimball’s commitment to child welfare and juvenile justice issues throughout her career has served the citizens of Louisiana well. Her early work framed her view of the special attention needed for children involved in the child welfare system. This view has continued to shape her support for the Louisiana Supreme Court’s partnership with federal and state officials in the child welfare system to promote better outcomes for children and families through coordination and training among the judiciary and attorneys. Most recently, Chief Justice Kimball demonstrated unwavering support for ongoing development and training in the child welfare system through the Pelican Center for Children and Families, which provides an opportunity for formal, collaborative relationships among key child welfare stakeholders. While her voice on the court will truly be missed, Chief Kimball leaves a legacy of encouraging partnership between all branches of government and stakeholders to promote programs with the goal of improving outcomes for Louisiana’s children.”

Suffice it to say that this amazing, powerful woman is retiring from the bench with a legacy of putting children first. She has made a real difference and set a course that will continue to improve the welfare of the children and families in the future. When it comes to justice for Louisiana’s children, Justice Kimball has the mind of a jurist, the heart of a mother, and the spirit of a warrior. On behalf of those whose voices are too often silenced or ignored or drowned out: Thank you, Justice Kimball, for giving your all.

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