



# MECKLENBURG BAR NEWS

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## “I LOVE IT WHEN A PLAN COMES TOGETHER”

### *Spotlight on Council for Children's Rights Executive Director Bob Simmons*

I have talked to a number of folks in the Bar since I moved from a 32-year commercial real estate law career with big firms—doing a lot of pro bono and community work in a parallel unpaid career—to a full-time position as the Council for Children's Rights' (CFCR) Executive Director (ED).

Some people say they're jealous because I have my “retirement job” and that it must be great to have gotten out of the long hours and high pressure of private practice.

I admit that it is nice not to have to keep track of my life in six-minute increments or to bill clients, but the reality is that the hours are actually longer, the pressure is no less and the stakes are higher in many ways—both for the impact of my performance on the agency and for the impact of the agency on the lives of the children we serve. At least when I billed a client, they had an obligation to pay for the services rendered; and I was not the only person responsible for bringing in revenue to pay the staff and keep the lights on.

Now, when I meet with a foundation, a corporation, or an individual donor, they can choose to provide us funding or not. We provide no direct service or benefit to them. We depend entirely on their interest in helping us provide services to individual children in peril

within the scope of our legal teams and in helping us affect public policy and mend the systems serving our children to improve the community we share. That might sound



*Council for Children's Rights Executive Director Bob Simmons*

like it has a greater natural emotional appeal, but it is in many ways a harder proposition to convey than “We can help you get your deal done faster, better and less expensively than our competitors.”

Some people say they're jealous because I have “found my passion” and say that they have been thinking about what they will do for their “second act.”

I understand this sentiment. The private practice of commercial law has changed a lot since I started in Houston with Baker & Botts in 1983 before moving to Robinson, Bradshaw & Hinson, P.A., in Charlotte in 1986 as the 44<sup>th</sup> lawyer in that firm. The business pressure of that change is felt most strongly by those of us who are at the age of firm leadership and share the responsibility for adapting to a harsh

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## When a Plan Comes Together

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and fluid market. Many commercial lawyers of all ages seek meaning in their professional lives beyond the monetary interests of their clients and themselves. I was fortunate that I was in the right place at the right time for the honor and privilege of the opportunity to serve as the Council's ED.

I was also fortunate that I was ready to accept that opportunity because my colleagues at Robinson Bradshaw, then at Helms Mullis & Wicker, and finally at McGuireWoods, had encouraged and supported my pro bono, nonprofit and community service over the decades. Robinson Bradshaw and Helms Mullis are Charlotte institutions where the senior members still remember the founding of the partnerships and they have a long and storied history of building this community through service in business, in government and in community organizations. For them, encouragement of my parallel unpaid career as a freelance troublemaker on children's issues in our community was a part of the firm culture.

McGuireWoods had similar origins and a similar ethos beginning even longer ago in Richmond. I believe that it was a natural fit for me to continue my community work after the merger despite the national size and scope of the firm and my role as the Chair of the Real Estate and Land Use Department. With McGuireWoods, I ultimately managed 86 lawyers in 12 U.S. offices, London and Brussels, and my tenure from 2008 through 2012 coincided with a period of significant turmoil and difficulty in the commercial real estate and finance market. I did not know it at the time, but my management experience with McGuireWoods was the final piece of preparation in my private practice career for the opportunity of leading the Council.

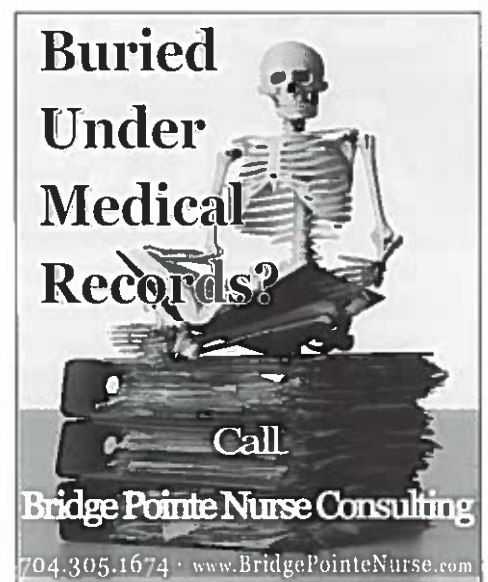
My pro bono work as a volunteer lawyer with the Children's Law Center from 1987 to 2000 in school discipline, special education, and contested custody cases, and as the general counsel of the Children and Family Services Center from the beginning of the project in 1998 through March 2015, was important to understanding the individual advocacy work of the Council and the interaction of the Council with other agencies serving children and families, with corporate and foundation fundraising, and with the City in a public-private partnership. My 18 years as a board member of the Children's Law Center, the Council for Children, and the Council for Children's Rights, as well as my 14 years as a board member of the Children and Family Services Center (including service as the president of all four boards), was important for me to understand how nonprofits and nonprofit boards work. My membership on a number of MCB committees and my leadership of the Partnership with Schools Committee, through which I read to two classes each week at Devonshire Elementary School from 1990 through 2005, helped me get to know many lawyers outside my firm and to see the real issues facing the most challenged children in our community. My service on the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education in 2000 and 2001, when I led the drafting and negotiation of the first post-Swann student assignment plan for CMS in the anticipation and wake of the Fourth Circuit affirmation of the Western District unitary status ruling, allowed me to see our excellent school system from the inside and to participate in the operation of County government.

Even though I was ready for this step, and even though I am glad that I am now working on the front lines for our community's children every day, it was daunting to set aside a successful private practice career that took lots of effort to develop over many years. I had to give up my role as co-chair of

the annual Georgetown University Law Center Advanced Commercial Leasing Institute, to which I was appointed in 2012 after serving on the Advisory Board since 2004. I will let my fellowship in the American College of Real Estate Lawyers lapse at the end of this year. With both of these departures will go my regular association with friends from across the U.S. and Canada. I gave up the pride of my association with my firm colleagues and I gave up my daily interaction with them as trusted friends.

The good news for me is that my friends at Robinson Bradshaw and McGuireWoods have strong relationships with the Council as volunteer lawyers, board members and supporters, so I will not lose touch with them now that I am just down the hill at 5<sup>th</sup> and Davidson. And my position with the Council has helped me reestablish more direct relationships with more members of the Bar and with the folks in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, in city and county government and agencies and in the community of advocates who work to improve the lives of our community's children.

As Hannibal Smith (George Peppard) used to say on *The A-Team*, "I love it when a plan comes together" – even though I did not know it was a plan until it came together. **MCB**



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