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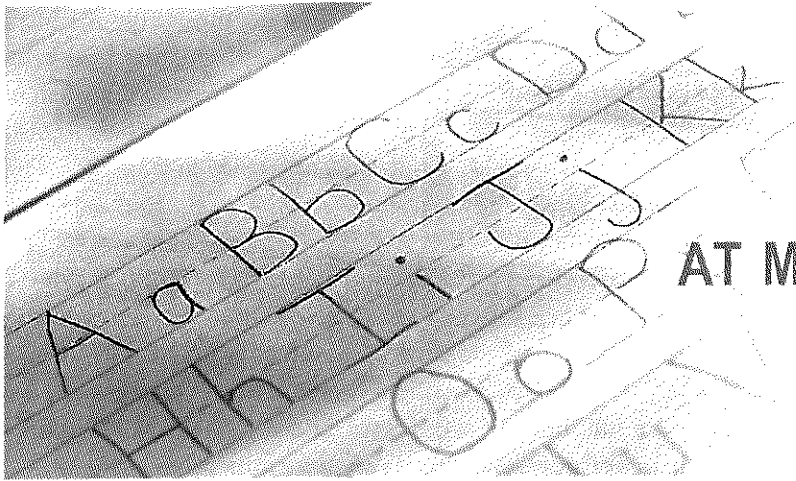
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Volunteers





AT MY DAUGHTER'S SCHOOL



Elizabeth Welch

By Elizabeth Welch
OTLA Guardian

I posted on my Facebook page a thank you to my fellow OTLAn who spoke at North Portland's Peninsula K-8's career fair. My dear (childless) friend from college commented, "You're such a mom." True, true! I have found volunteering at my daughter's school to be a life changer for me — both as a mother and a lawyer. I feel very involved in my daughters' lives. Even if I work long hours as a lawyer, I feel I am helping my community, and I can bring my career skills to bear. In the end, I am staying involved while gaining skills and compassion — all good things for a personal injury attorney.

Why I volunteer at school

My first motivation to volunteer at my daughter's school was simply because her father and I divorced when she was two and I really missed her when she was staying with her father. Going to her

school allowed me to see her on these days and it satisfied an inherent snoopy quality of mine — what was she doing all day without me?

When my oldest daughter was ready to start kindergarten I noticed the elementary school was right around the corner from my house here in North Portland. Many parts of North Portland are economically depressed, and my neighborhood is no different. I noticed a lot of the local kids didn't attend the local school. We made a decision to support our local school and to grow roots in our neighborhood.

I also made the decision a few years ago to practice in North Portland. By practicing, volunteering and living in one place, I have the opportunity to be in on the ground floor. That I live here, work here and send my daughter to the schools here seems to make other parents more trusting of my commitment. Also, I can think of at least three major politicians who live in my neighborhood. When I run into Rep. Tina Kotek at Walgreens or bump into Sen. Chip Shields at Freddy's or walk behind Secretary of State Kate Brown in the St. Johns Parade, they see a familiar face, someone who's involved. They know I live here and am willing to help.

I decided to get more heavily involved at Peninsula when I started going to PTA meetings. At the beginning we had a budget of a few thousand dollars a year through catalog sales and a few other

activities. I have been on the Board of OTLA for four years and have become familiar with effective ways to raise money. I quickly learned, raising money for a low income school is a whole other animal.

When my daughter was in first grade, I helped put together our first silent auction and gala. It was amazing and we made \$7,600. The next year we made a more disappointing \$4,500. That year I experienced a downside of volunteering, trying to hold up an entire event by one's self. While many hands make short work, one or two hands make a decidedly scaled back event.

The question became, would I just fundraise for my child's school or would I also become actively involved and spend time at the school? As lawyers, we are busy people and we don't have a lot of spare time during the day. But I found the time I spent at my daughter's school was well worth it.

The benefits

Need some heart healthy, life affirming, non-lawyer activities? Hang out with some kids! The greatest benefit to volunteering for a school is absolutely to be around kids. Kids help adults connect with their own childish side. It is exciting to help kids learn and watch understanding happen. Another perk to hanging out in the classroom is that kids who see their parents — or any adult — participate in something that's not all about the adults,

are more likely to model that behavior.

For me, getting to know the other kids in my daughter's classes helped my awareness of my own child. By my actions, I was telling my daughter that I support her world, her community and her challenges. By showing up, she could see I made her life a priority. As lawyers, we like to think we make other people and their problems a priority. Our children may not understand that until they see us spending time in their school.

Knowing what was really going on inside my daughter's school and what her day was like were motivating factors for me. I do not practice school law, but since I am on the PTA (I was recently elected President), I hear from the principal about why certain policies or changes are ill fated or non-workable. Because of my legal education and experience, I feel I can direct my complaints in a constructive and realistic way. I can ask, and help other parents ask with some knowledge and education of their own, whether a policy or issue could realistically be changed and have some chance at a real answer.

Being a fly on the wall at the school helps me know which kids are struggling and which families need a helping hand. My mother and I, with some help from another Peninsula family and some lawyer friends, supplied over 30 winter coats to Peninsula kids this year. It was thrilling for our lawyer friends to be asked to do something tangible for kids that would make an instant positive change (look Ma, I'm warm!) for a child.

Sometimes a child needs help to be included in classes and programs. My niece has cerebral palsy and is in a wheelchair. My sister wanted to make sure she could be involved in an after school dance and music class so my sister volunteered to teach the class. She's still teaching that class three years later. She loves the fact that she knows all of the kids coming up through the school, knows the parents and feels tied to the school in that way.



Welch with her daughters, 9-year-old Ava (left) and 3-year-old Elena.

The drawbacks

On a PTA filled with busy parents, getting people to do their jobs is a constant challenge. Good intentions abound, but the work often falls on the most responsible. As a self-employed attorney, I

do a lot of tasks because I have a particular set of skills and I have access to copy machines, the Internet, laptops and other supplies. My mom says I am "conscientious to a fault." That means I am overloaded and sometimes angry about it.

Burn out is huge among PTA members and other school volunteers. I have heard that even in affluent schools, a few people do most of the work. There is resentment when volunteer parents can't enjoy their own kid's programs since they are often helping to put on the event. The best solution for burnout is simply saying, "No." Also, it's a good idea to always be training and recruiting other volunteers to spread the work around.

I get some clients from my volunteering. However, I have noticed, and have been told, that parents with embarrassing or complicated (or seriously criminal) cases will not go a lawyer who is also another school parent. No matter how

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discreet or confidential I am, I have noticed the school affiliation is too close for comfort for many.

You can help

Your kids may be grown, or you may not have kids. You can still be a school volunteer. As lawyers, we certainly understand the value of education, not only in the way we support ourselves, but how we operate in the world. If you can't go to a few school auctions or spend some time helping in a classroom, then ask around your office, maybe someone on your staff has school contacts. Would that person like to be able to take time off for a field trip with a child or grandchild? Could your office sponsor a day doing a school cleanup, a coat or clothes drive or putting together a teacher appreciation package? Did you want to speak at a career day? Could you donate paper or snacks for a PTA meeting? There

are lots of ways to get involved.

Some people coach sports teams, a very common way many parents volunteer with their kids and in schools. This is great, but not all kids are athletes. Many kids need help in fundamental ways that do not involve telling them how to catch a ball. Meditate on what you really want to do to help and then research the countless organizations and schools where you can invest your time. SMART (Start Making A Reader Today) is a program for people wanting to work one-on-one to promote literacy. Portland's PTA Clothes Closet needs volunteers to sort clothes. There are mock trial classes and constitutional law classes to teach or advise. Consider starting a class at a minority school.

It may be a cliché but as Whitney Houston sang, "Children are the future. Teach them well and let them lead the way." Children are also totally at the mercy of their environments, for better or worse. We see in our practices, repre-

senting real people with real problems, what kind of economic life and prospects most people are looking at. I believe I owe it to my neighborhood and my community to do what I can to help the children I know and work to improve their lives. If you prefer a more global approach to your volunteering, there are many nonprofits and volunteer opportunities that take that approach. I simply want to be around my child, to help her classmates however I can and to offer an example of what can be in my community.

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