

Nonprofit group forms to help Children's Justice Center in Vancouver

Justice for Children provides therapy dog for abused children



Photo by Zachary Kaufman

Tabitha came to Vancouver due to the efforts of former Vancouver City Councilor Pat Jollota, left, and her new nonprofit organization, Justice for Children. Tabitha splits her time between Children's Justice Center Executive Director Mary Blanchette, right, and a YWCA children's sexual assault advocate.

By Andrea Damewood

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By Zachary Kaufman

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Tabitha, a new therapy dog dedicated to comforting juvenile abuse victims, sits in the offices of the Arthur D. Curtis Children's Justice Center on Wednesday.

If you go

Not too long ago, a 6-year-old girl arrived at the Arthur D. Curtis Children's Justice Center in downtown Vancouver, stress and fear set on her small face as she prepared to tell her story of abuse to investigators.

It's not an easy job for anyone — let alone a small child — to tell their story. To relieve their trauma. But then Tabitha padded by.

"The girl looks at Tabitha. Tabitha looks at the her," Mary Blanchette, the Children's Justice Center executive director, said. "And she just smiled. Nothing else in the world is going to make them smile like Tabitha."

A 2-year-old ivory retriever and black Labrador retriever mix, Tabitha is the center's new service dog, providing comfort for the juvenile visitors to the center. And it's just that look, her human trainers say, that brings relief to a boy or girl in their greatest time of distress and need.

Bred to be exceptionally calm, Tabitha approaches only if invited. With a simple command, she gently places her paws on a lap and delivers a fat doggy kiss. She can lie still for five hours, if necessary.

"That's her whole role, to make it a little softer and smoother for kids as they go through the whole investigative process," Blanchette said Wednesday, Tabitha's leash in hand.

Tabitha arrived in Vancouver in March, after a two-year process of screening and training for her human handlers by Canine Companions for Independence in California. (Tabitha II gets her name because she is the second dog named Tabitha the agency has trained.) The California nonprofit spends about \$20,000 on each dog it breeds and trains, and then allows agencies or those with disabilities to use the animal without a fee.

But travel, training and other costs mean adopting Tabitha still takes thousands of dollars. Thousands of dollars that the agency — which just underwent budget cuts from its main funding sources, the city of Vancouver and Clark County — does not have.

■ **What:** Justice for Children, a nonprofit group to raise money and awareness for the Arthur D. Curtis Children's Justice Center.

■ **Benefit:** The Boulevard Kiwanis present "The Magic of Laughter," a family-friendly comedy show to benefit Justice for Children.

■ **When:** 7 p.m. April 16.

■ **Where:** Fort Vancouver High School Auditorium.

■ **Cost:** \$15.

■ **Auction:** Justice for Children also has an auction on its website, with items including signed books, quilts and jewelry boxes.

■ **For more information:** <http://www.clarkj...> or call 360-397-6002.

Enter the newly formed Justice for Children, which got iQ Credit Union to donate the full cost of bringing Tabitha home and Evergreen Animal Hospital to donate veterinary care.

A nonprofit organization aimed solely at supporting the Children's Justice Center and raising awareness of child abuse, Justice for Children was put together last year by Pat Jollota, former Vancouver city councilor and longtime Children's Justice Center board member. Upon retiring in 2009, Jollota decided the most important work she did in all her years in office was with the justice center. So she stepped forward, and has been raising money for specialized training for staff and investigators, upgraded interview recording equipment, educational programs and even finding ways to make the decor of the center more child-friendly.

Before, "we weren't getting extra stuff," Blanchette said. "We weren't even getting credit for what we did."

When she was a city councilor, "there was no way in the world I could have taken a budget item like (Tabitha) to the city council," Jollota said. But as the leader of Justice for Children, she added, it's the exact kind of money she can go after.

Earlier this week, Jollota, Blanchette and Tabitha visited the Vancouver City Council to mark April as Child Abuse Awareness and Prevention Month.

"I really couldn't advocate when I was sitting where you are, because it would be taken as political grandstanding," she told the city council. "But now, now I can advocate, now I can yell out."

Also involved with The Humane Society for Southwest Washington, Jollota joked: "I don't get mushy over dogs, but with Tabitha I just melt."

Tabitha splits her time between Blanchette and YWCA Clark County sexual assault advocate Gail McClellan. The dog can sit with children in investigation rooms, walk them to court and greet them at the center. As of now, however, county judges — citing a fear that a dog would lower decorum or show preferential treatment to the child witness — have been resistant to allowing Tabitha to join children in the courtroom, said Dustin Richardson, deputy prosecutor for child abuse.

The Vancouver police and Clark County detectives who work with kids at the justice center also were initially wary of having a four-footed interview companion, but in the few weeks they've worked with Tabitha, they said they're sold on her therapeutic benefits.

"A couple of times, there's been little ones who were a little bit shy," Vancouver Police Detective Jenni Hubethal said. "Tabitha warmed them right up, and they were much more comfortable when we sat down to talk. It makes it so much more comfortable being here because of Tabitha."

The Children's Justice Center is funded by Clark County, Vancouver and state and federal grants, all of which are dwindling, making Jollota's work even more vital, Blanchette said. In the past year, the Clark County Sheriff's Office pulled one of its three committed detectives, bringing the number of investigators to five. Blanchette said she also had to lay off a program coordinator, leaving her and three secretaries to run the center. At the same time, referrals of suspected felony abuse cases went up 33 percent, to 3,016, in 2010.

Justice for Children has garnered donations of \$5,000 from both Beaches Restaurant & Bar and from the Clark County Association of Realtors, along with finding other businesses and donors to help.

"If we're going to do the best for our kids, we're going to need community partners," Blanchette said. "And that's just what the community has done through Pat's group."

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