

# UR's National Center for Family Law Brings Focus for Lawyers, Judges, Scholars, and Clients

by Rob Walker

The University of Richmond School of Law encourages pro bono service by all members of the law school community.

The National Center for Family Law at the University of Richmond School of Law was established in 2007. The center provides academic and service programs to enhance the quality of the American legal system in matters relating to families and children.

American society has a profound interest in fostering legal and public-policy study of family law issues and in training law students, lawyers, and judges in family law matters in collaboration with many different academic disciplines.

The center is national and international in its breadth of interest. It has an especially strong relationship with public and private organizations in Virginia.

The University of Richmond School of Law encourages pro bono service by all members of the law school community. Members of the Senior Lawyers Conference of the Virginia State Bar, with their large reservoir of experience, wisdom, and talent, can support this pro bono activity. The creation of programs with other bar groups and public agencies to promote pro bono services in the field of family law is an important mission of the center.

Through the center, the interests of families and children will be served by research, discussion, and debate on reforms and improvements in the nation's family law policies and processes. Family law issues in modern society are increasingly complex. The center will bring

together experts from different academic disciplines to address the issues.

The center also benefits law students who plan to pursue a family law practice.

The center plans to sponsor conferences that focus on legal or policy issues germane to family law. It might promote research and scholarship through research papers and presentations. It will provide continuing legal education.

The center will publish of a scholarly journal, newsletters, Internet resources, and other materials; convene task forces to study specific family law issues; and undertake interdisciplinary studies funded by grants.

The center debuted in September 2007 with a symposium cosponsored by Virginia CLE to discuss the law, research, and social policies that affect families and children. Virginia's first lady, Anne B. Holton, who has spent her legal career advocating for children, applauded the center for bringing together "some of the best minds in the nation in fields related to family law." Holton, a former juvenile and domestic relations court judge in Richmond, joined about 150 lawyers, judges, law school deans and professors, mental health professionals, social services workers, and others from as far away as California for the three-day symposium, titled "State of the Family 2007."

Edward D. Barnes of Chesterfield, chair of the center's board and a thirty-six-year

veteran of family law practice, said response to the symposium demonstrates how far this field of law has progressed in recent years. “It is getting a lot more attention in the courts and legislatures,” he said. Issues such as elder law, child placement and custody, and welfare have moved forward on the public agenda.

Holton described family law as an increasingly complex subspecialty within the law that often demands attention from someone “who does this close to full time. You’ve really got to know this stuff.” Holton said that Virginia usually does well by its young people, but it is not doing well enough for older children. Many of those between ages twelve and eighteen are placed and left in the care of social services agencies — particularly in group homes and residential facilities that cost fifty thousand dollars or more a year per child.

“We are overusing congregate care,” she said. Having government agencies replace a parent “is never going to be the best way to care for children who in many cases have been through the equivalent of what soldiers see in war.” At eighteen, they will “age out” of care without family contact. They may be incapable of caring for themselves and at high risk of winding up homeless, incarcerated, on welfare, or in mental institutions, Holton said. “It’s shocking.”

Speakers also discussed the roles of culture and religion on families, and they spoke of transformations that have taken place in the American family throughout history.

The symposium was approved for continuing legal education credits.

Adrienne E. Volenik, a UR law professor and the center’s acting director, hopes it will become more than a center for professional training. “We want it to be more of a mix of academicians and practitioners

because that’s where the creative ideas come from,” she said. “There were cases in this year’s symposium where academics presented ideas that practitioners were skeptical of. That led to considerable discussion that was helpful to us all. It’s a wonderful way to test ideas outside the academic realm.

**“This is a field that requires multidisciplinary knowledge,” said Barnes. “There’s so much more to it than the law. And it has such an impact on us as a society and as human beings.”**

“We expect the center to become a leading resource, a clearinghouse for information and experts, for legislators, academicians, and practitioners who are looking for solutions to challenges facing children and families,” Volenik said. “This will be a place where people can turn for models of excellence, best practices, and for support in facing these complex, important issues.”

A grant from the Lipman Foundation will help the center reach into the Richmond community to work with low-income families who need legal assistance. The \$651,000 grant will help fund an interdisciplinary clinic that will provide direct legal services, access to psychological care, counseling, and social services for low-income children and their families.

Plans call for the clinic to be located in urban Richmond, where it will partner with the Richmond Families Initiative, a joint venture of the University of Richmond School of Law and the university’s Center for Civic Engagement. It will use the services of the Department of Psychology and School of Social Work at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Pro bono services will be provided through the Richmond Families Initiative, and the law school’s Harry Carrico Pro Bono Center might join it downtown. The combined resources of these entities “enable us to extend our outreach into the community in this complex area of great need,” Volenik said. The center also will

draw expertise from its board, which includes lawyers, judges, scholars, and teachers.

“This is a field that requires multidisciplinary knowledge,” said Barnes. “There’s so much more to it than the law. And it has such an impact on us as a society and as human beings.”

Plans call for the University of Richmond School of Law to develop a curriculum that will enable law students to pursue a concentration in family law through the center. That program should be in place by the end of this academic year. The law school also hopes to use the center to establish stronger bonds with undergraduate faculty and students, Volenik said. It will involve faculty whose research is related to the wide range of work the center is undertaking.

“There are wonderful people on the undergraduate faculty who are working on issues related to the family in education, psychology, and anthropology,” and other fields, Volenik said. “We’d like to be able to promote their work and to support their efforts as well.”

## Senior Lawyers Conference

The center also might help develop a course on the role of family in society that could be offered to undergraduates, Volenik said. The University of Richmond School of Law's Juvenile Law and Policy Clinic, which focuses on legislative issues, will be enlisted "to take what we learn and apply it to the legislative arena," Volenik said. ☞

*Note: This article was adapted from an article by Rob Walker that appeared in the Winter 2008 issue of Richmond Law magazine, a publication of the University of Richmond School of Law.*



**Rob Walker** is the editor of *Richmond Law* magazine, a publication of the University of Richmond School of Law. A Richmond-based journalist and editor, he worked for more than fifteen years with daily newspapers, including the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* where he covered legal issues and higher education. Walker has bachelor's and master's degrees in English from Washington and Lee University and the University of South Carolina, respectively.

### **Board Members, National Center for Family Law**

Edward D. Barnes, chair  
Adrienne E. Volenik, acting director  
Nancy H. Phillips, director  
of development  
Donald K. Butler  
Mary G. Commander  
Lawrence D. Diehl  
John D. Douglass  
Robert C. Elliott II  
Cheshire l'Anson Eveleigh  
Ronald S. Evans  
Hon. Johanna L. Fitzpatrick  
Melvyn B. Frumkes  
Cheryl Lynn Hepfer  
Barry Kantor  
Hon. Donald H. Kent  
James W. Korman  
Hon. William H. Ledbetter Jr.  
Patrick McConnell  
Janice R. Moore  
Rodney M. Poole  
Philip Schwartz  
Peter N. Swisher  
Betty A. Thompson  
Ronald R. Tweel  
Hon. George D. Varoutsos  
Robert E. Shepherd Jr.  
Rodney A. Smolla  
James F. Stutts  
Hon. Richard D. Taylor Jr.  
Brett Turner  
Ann B. Vaden  
W. Clark Williams Jr.