

## Going to court

Before I began work at the Southeast Alabama Child Advocacy Center (CAC), I worked for a year as a social worker with the Houston County Department of Human Resources.

As part of my job duties, I had to go to juvenile court with children and families. I vividly remember going into Judge Bill McFatter's courtroom as a newly hired social worker. It is hard to describe the emotions I was feeling. Before taking the social worker job, I had never even been in the courthouse. So, to say I was a little intimidated and uncertain about the judicial proceedings would be an understatement. Even though the room was full of people, I felt alone and scared. As I listened, it seemed everyone knew what was going on and knew exactly what to do, but not me. I was there to speak up for an abused child and a hurting family. It was my job to make sure the child was safe and to get help for the parents. To say I was overwhelmed would be an understatement.

A few weeks ago, the CAC staff provided training at a workshop hosted by District Attorney Doug Valeska. I believe spending time with District Attorneys Doug Valeska, Kirke Adams and Ben Reeves and their staffs was beneficial for the children we serve. Once again, we were reminded that children are not little adults. They lack coping skills, communication skills and the ability to protect themselves. Children are in

the process of developing physically, mentally and



**Sherryl Walker**

*Listening to their silent cries*

emotionally. It is important to understand developmental stages of children as we listen to them tell their stories of abuse. Being in a courtroom and knowing what to do may be second nature to prosecutors, but they, too, are not immune from stress when in court. Every day prosecutors deal with people who are accused of committing various crimes. Under our judicial system, the accused are considered innocent until they have their day in court. The district attorney and his staff are tasked with representing victims as they prosecute people who do not obey the law. Prosecutors are challenged to prove their cases as they call witnesses to the stand and provide evidence which may ultimately put the "bad person" in jail. This is a very stressful but necessary job.

Going to court can be scary, especially for a child. Often, the crime victims are unfamiliar with the court process and have many questions. They may be like I was many years ago: a little intimidated, uncertain about the judicial proceedings and feeling alone and scared. I believe it is important for the district attorney, defense attorneys and judges to be aware of ways they can help lessen the stress for children who must testify in court. If everyone would look at the child victim as if they were



SUBMITTED PHOTO

**The working relationship between local district attorneys and the Southeast Alabama Child Advocacy Center staff plays a vital role in aiding children who have suffered sexual or severe physical abuse. From left are DA Kirke Adams (Dale-Geneva counties); Aline Easley, CAC staff; Sherryl Walker, CAC executive director; DA Doug Valeska (Houston-Henry counties); Marie Johnson, CAC staff; DA Ben Reeves (Barbour-Bullock counties); and Ivy Andress, CAC staff.**

our child or grandchild, I believe the court process could be made a little easier on children and their families.

My first court experience was more than 20 years ago, and I have never forgotten that experience and how it felt. Just writing about it brings back all those anxious thoughts and anxiety that I felt. In the past few years, I have had the opportunity to go to court often. Sometimes, I have to go for "official" CAC business, and sometimes I go and talk to the people who work in the judicial system about the CAC. Every time I go in a courthouse, I am reminded that this is a place where people's lives are changed forever. If a person goes to court, they are not there to have a good time; they are

there for serious business. I still get anxious when I walk through that security scan. Something about court is just unsettling.

Being sexually abused — especially by someone you know, love and trust — is a terrible thing. Facing the abuser and testifying in open court is another terrifying experience. Remember, every child who testifies in court is someone's child or grandchild. That child could be your child or grandchild. How would you want them to be treated?

Go to [www.southeastcac.com](http://www.southeastcac.com) to learn more about the CAC and how you can help.

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