THE KANSAN

A place for the abused: Advocacy center key to child abuse prosecutions

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T. Walton helped found the Heart To Heart Child Advocacy Center 15 years ago. The center exists today as a place for children to be interviewed about abuse they have suffered, and to connect those children to counseling.

Walton can remember the case, one he was working, that convinced him to get people together and get the center going.

“This poor girl, six years old, was interviewed 10 to 12 times,” Walton said. “Near the end (a prosecutor) sent me again because we wanted a rape charge. We had to have the rape. The girl had to tell us she was entered sexually. That was tough. ... The girl saw me coming and she just went (threw hands up, exhaled heavily with a sad look on her face). I felt so horrible.”

Walton, and others around him, started working to make sure children did not have to be interviewed multiple times. Since the center was founded, it has expanded to multiple counties and assisted in 1,700 cases. This year, one director Kerry Grosch says is average, the center has already assisted with 45 cases.

“When I opened Heart To Heart I was asked about my goal,” Walton said. “I said to have the doors shut. Put me out of business. The cases are climbing.”

In the case of John, Jennifer and Kim, a family who shared their story of abuse with the Kansan, the center was key to getting the accused to admit to what happened and agree to a plea bargain and prison time.

“They were able to give my daughter a place that looks like this, with stuffed animals, butterflies and couches to come and do the most awful thing she has ever had to do, give that statement,” John said. “I don’t know if she could have done this in a police station, it was too overwhelming.”

In that case, 15 years ago, Walton remembers getting a conviction. At that time, the judge allowed the girl to testify via closed circuit television from another room.

It was during that testimony, with Walton at her side, she was able to make an impression on the jury. She was asked by the defense attorney if she was asked by her mother to say certain things during her testimony and during interviews.

Her answer is what brought the case to a close.

“The girl said yes,” Walton said. “She was pounding on the desk and said ’she told me to tell the truth, the truth, the truth! I think that won it, I think that was it.”

In the case of John, Jennifer and Kim, the center arranged for a meeting with the county attorney, and she was given a tour of the district court facilities at the Harvey County Courthouse. Everyone wanted to help her be prepared for what might be coming next.

Dede Trumble, a child advocate for Heart-2-Heart, took the lead. She gave those tours and worked with Kim to make sure she would feel safe throughout the entire process.

“I think that is what my daughter wanted to see, when it was not in the moment (of trial),” Jennifer said. “Our daughter is very intelligent, and she asked good questions. She grew up a lot and she wanted to be a part of what was going on. The agency, her father and I worked together to know what she was ready for, or what she was not ready for. All she had to do was say a code word, she was escorted out and back to Heart-2-Heart.”

During a conference with the prosecution and defense — one that took 5 ½ hours — a plea bargain was struck. Kim was present for parts of that conference.

“It was a horrible, horrible day. Without the Heart To Heart there supporting us and her, I can not imagine how terrible this would have been,” John said.

For other parts of the conference, she was not there. It was too difficult to be in the room with the man who had abused her.

“We came back here and had a massive UNO tournament while they ironed out the details he agreed to,” Trumble said. “It was hard, she loved this guy.”

The center has helped Kim get counseling — something believed to be key.

“Those children that go through this, if we can get them counseling, then they can come out better and not let this dictate their entire lives,” Walton said.

The importance of having the center, according to county attorney David Yoder, is the recording of the initial interview and that the interview is done by a trained professional.

That interview can be copied to all parties involved, saving the need for multiple interviews.

“Everyone can see what the child has to say,” Yoder said. “The child only has to tell the story once, that is one of the magic things about the center. ... The only time the child really has to go over the story again is in preparation for trial.”