In child welfare representation it is really important to see how we could advance children's voices, and not dismiss their thoughts, time, or their families.”

- Annette Appell

Professor Annette R. Appell was introduced to the child welfare system through her interest in providing legal help to children and their families. Since her early career, she has represented hundreds of children, dozens of parents, and has taught law students in four states in effectively supporting reunification. She is a nationally-known and respected leader in the child welfare field. Her writings regarding adoption, family relations and children’s rights and feminist-informed advocacy have inspired the advancement of children's rights. She has served on the editorial boards of the Juvenile and Family Court Journal and the Adoption Quarterly, and on the Board of the National Coalition for Child Protection Reform. Most recently, she was a law professor at Washington University Law School. In honor of her recent retirement, her colleagues and she sat down with Kathleen Dubois to share a few words about her life’s work, inspiration, and passion.

Professor Appell first became involved in child welfare and reunification work while in law school at Northwestern University School of Law, where she worked with a family and child welfare clinic that represented children who were unjustly removed from their homes and placed in foster care. She continued to work with this clinic after she graduated from law school.

“It was amazing how poorly the system worked for families. I recognized how much the children taught me--that it’s very important to know your family and have some help for the families, parents, or caregivers, so that they (children) can know where they are, who they are.” Appell said.

Much of Professor Appell’s written works emphasize the importance of biological ties in contributing to children’s identity, and she brings a unique perspective to these ideas as an adoptee herself. She shared that as an adoptee, she grew up with a book called “The Special Me” with a photo of her as a baby, that inspired her interest in adoption and identity.

“It was a really positive thing for me, that I had a piece of that (my identity), and I also obviously
knew all this time that they weren’t my birth parents. That’s when I sort of got interested in the adoption and identity piece.” Appell said.

As Diane Redleaf, Professor Appell’s colleague and fellow National Coalition for Child Protection Reform Board Member notes, “What’s remarkable about Annette, in terms of her own advocacy, she’s been an advocate consistently for the relationship between the child and biological family of origin, and she’s an adoptee. She understands the importance of that tie to family, and she speaks to that persuasively.”

Furthermore, Professor Appell’s has written cutting-edge and intersection work on the unjust blame the child welfare system places on mothers, especially single mothers and mothers of minority background, and has pushed the system to recognize how deeply harmful separation is to families and mothers.

“I had a very critical outlook that parents are not horrible people. They’re human, they’re flawed, they’re very valuable to their children and families, and in my experience, the child welfare system put a lot of kids in a lot of bad places by not letting them have their family.” Appell said.

Ultimately, her impact and contribution in the field of child welfare and reunification, family and children’s rights, and child representation as a practicing lawyer, advocate, scholar, and teacher cannot be understated.
Redleaf identifies Professor Appell’s distinct interest in pursuing unification and justice through combining scholarship and clinical practice, stating, “There’s not that many people who’ve been able to combine scholarship and practice. She’s been so dedicated to both, she has pursued her career all over the country, and she’s had that idea of scholarship and practice since she started as a lawyer.”

Martin Guggenheim, a colleague of Professor Appell’s and the Fiorello LaGuardia Professor of Clinical Law at New York University Law School, stated, “I think hers is among the most important voices on behalf of children, in terms of fighting more for their families, their parents, and their rights to be raised by their families. I’ve always learned from Annette, she is a prolific scholar who made a massive contribution to the field, and always had important things to say, telling stories through her cases and teaching a generation of law students how to be great lawyers.”

In recent years, Professor Appell has met with her biological brother, an experience she stated was “really wonderful and meaningful.” In her retirement, she hopes to write more about her biological family and about the important links between birth and effective families, as well as continue to contribute positively to the child welfare and reunification field.

Interview by Kathleen Dubois, Managing Attorney, Parental Justice Program of Legal Services of Eastern Missouri. For 21 years she has provided holistic legal representation on every level to parents in the Missouri child welfare system: civil litigation, administrative practice and appellate representation. She is proud to have co-counseled cases with Professor Appell, always with good outcomes for our clients. Many thanks to Meghana Bharadwaj of Columbia University, whose help on this article was invaluable. Thanks as well to Cheryl Tadin for photographs and support.