



DAVID SARASOHN

Standing for kids — and showing up

The first question, maybe, was why Jonah Edelman — Oxford Ph.D., son of famous parents — was in this South Salem church in late June, asking Marion County commissioners why they were dropping several juvenile mental health counselors from their budget.

But the real question is why 400 other people came out to join him.

In organizing on children's issues, it's hard to turn out enough people to fill a sandbox.

It's even harder to put children's issues on top of a political agenda; parents are busy, kids don't vote, and it's hard to make campaign contributions out of an allowance.

Changing that equation is what Edelman is trying to do with Stand For Children, an effort to mobilize people who want to know why in America it's better to be a road than a kid.

The issue is a family concern; Edelman's parents are Marian Wright Edelman, president of the Children's Defense Fund, and Peter Edelman, former aide to Robert Kennedy and former assistant secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services, who resigned in protest after President Clinton signed the welfare reform bill.

Stand for Children is an organizational spinoff of the Children's Defense Fund, and when Jonah Edelman finished his Oxford dissertation — a study of the 1988 welfare reform effort — he decided to move into organizing.

He's executive director of the national Stand For Children, beginning with pilot programs in Maryland and Oregon — and also running the latter one himself.

"We haven't figured out," says Edelman, somehow managing to sound like both activist and academic, "if we're willing to provide the support that families need."

A place to start is political support. The goal is to set up local chapters of members who pay \$24 a year and — more important — commit to taking part in four or five "actions" a year. Local groups find their own focus.

Which is why the Salem chapter responded to the juvenile mental health counselor cuts.

"The children are always the first to go," says Edelman — a phrase that sounds a bit like a CDF poster. "These were by far the deepest cuts in the budget."

But if kids taking a hit is common, 400 people showing up to complain isn't. After 100 protesters appeared at a Marion County commissioners meeting, two commissioners — Randall Franke and Mike Ryan — agreed to the church meeting, where they found themselves facing the equivalent of a small town.

Thursday, Ryan said he was impressed not just by the numbers, but by the range of the community represented — as he put it, people from his job, his church, his kid's soccer team.

"To not be impressed by that kind of showing, I think you would have had to be asleep," he said.

"I don't think I am."

To Franke, "This was the most people in one place, concerned with a county budget issue, in 20 years."

"I welcome them," says Franke, also chairman of the county's Children and Family Commission and a board member of Children First for Oregon.

"I want to see them be a continuing force, not only in this community, but around the state."

At least in the Salem area, the outcome should encourage that.

Some positions were restored, and the commissioners agreed to set up a task force with Stand for Children to consider the county's providing of services.

That should happen, says Christine Ertl, a child and family therapist and vice chairman of the Salem-Keizer chapter, "in the next month or so."

Right now, says Ertl, the chapter is talking to its new members and considering looking at support for high-risk families, the in-home day-care system, and how it is that low-income families can find themselves regularly in and out of the Oregon Health Plan.

If Stand for Children can turn out people, it won't run out of issues.

"We need a voice for children in the community," says Edelman, "people who aren't fatalistic and aren't passive."

And who show up — and stand.

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