

First of its kind

CLINIC AIDS CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE SURVIVORS

Thanks to the generosity of Marlan B. Wilbanks (J.D.'86), earlier this year Georgia Law launched the nation's first experiential learning opportunity dedicated solely to the assistance of child sexual abuse survivors. The effort is being led by law school alumna Emma M. Hetherington (J.D.'11), and demand for the Wilbanks Child Endangerment and Sexual Exploitation Clinic's services has been extraordinary.

"We've had a steady stream of people contacting us for services," Hetherington said. "More than anything it's been eye-opening to see the prevalence of child sexual abuse in not only the local community, but across the state of Georgia and nationally."

The clinic's mission is threefold and includes representing survivors of child sexual abuse in civil tort claims, creating a network of attorneys all over the state who are trained to represent survivors of child sexual abuse and preparing the next generation of lawyers to be effective advocates in this sensitive and critical area.

Since the beginning of the year, the clinic has investigated more than 20 cases.

Hetherington said that once they receive an initial phone call, they determine whether they should investigate further or refer the client to other sources.

"We go through an exhaustive investigation process where we look at medical, psychological and educational records of clients as well as speak to witnesses," she said. "We not only assess the strength of a claim, but also whether the client is ready to go through a civil lawsuit. Lawsuits can take months, if not years, and can be traumatizing to clients who do not have sufficient therapeutic and other support systems."

Student interest in the clinic has been high, and the clinic has received broad support from the legal community. Several local bar associations have asked clinic representatives to speak at their meetings to educate their members on the activities of the clinic.

"We have also received inquiries from attorneys interested in taking cases pro bono," Hetherington said. "Attorneys understand the importance of the work we are doing and the need in the community."

Initial funding for the clinic was provided by Wilbanks after the passage of House Bill 17, the "Hidden Predator Act," by the Georgia legislature. The act created a two-year window of relief from the statute of limitations for bringing civil charges in the case of child sexual abuse. Regardless



of when the abuse occurred, victims can now bring suit against their abusers until the window closes on July 1, 2017. After that time, the law requires suits to be brought forward before the victim reaches 23 years of age or within two years of the time the victim makes the connection that sexual abuse caused current problems such as substance abuse or relationship difficulties.

Part of the clinic's funding provides for summer legal interns and a postgraduate fellowship.

"The act of sexually abusing a child is the attempted murder of a soul. I can see no more important task than protecting those in our society who too often have no voice," Wilbanks said. "The underlying goal of this clinic will be to educate, prepare and sensitize the next generation of lawyers as to the ways victims can be protected. On behalf of the children and families who would otherwise not be able to avail themselves of legal assistance, I applaud the University of Georgia School of Law for its willingness to be the first law school in the nation to draw a line in the sand against child sexual abuse."

Wilbanks CEASE Clinic Director Emma Hetherington (J.D.'11) (fifth from right) poses with clinic participants (l. to r.) Jon Tonge, Heidi Gholamhosseini, Hart Willoughby, Michael Alfano, Amble Johnson, Meredith Gardial (postgraduate fellow), Andrew Smith, Sarah Ehlers (administrative associate), Jacob Edwards and Ashmal Ali (undergraduate volunteer). Not pictured is John Farmer (summer intern). The clinic, the first of its kind in the nation, seeks to be a model for the nation with respect to the representation of survivors of child sexual abuse.