

**SYMPOSIUM**

**RACE, CULTURE, CLASS, AND CRISIS IN  
CHILD WELFARE: THEORY INTO  
PRACTICE**

INTRODUCTION

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Although child maltreatment is a phenomenon among all sectors of society, people of color are considerably overrepresented in the child welfare system. In light of this, and coupled with the fact that we are located in the most culturally diverse place on the planet—Queens County, New York City, where within just 109 square miles live nearly 2 ¼ million people speaking 138 different languages—the St. John’s Law School Child Advocacy Clinic<sup>1</sup> sought to engage in an expert dialogue concerning the role that race and culture play in the child welfare system.

In November 2006, *Race, Culture, Class, and Crisis in Child Welfare: Theory into Practice*<sup>2</sup> brought together distinguished scholars and practitioners from diverse disciplines (e.g., legal scholars, mental health professionals, social services commissioners)<sup>3</sup> for our first Symposium to raise awareness and

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<sup>1</sup> The Child Advocacy Clinic was formed in 2005 with the principal goal of representing victims of child abuse and neglect in New York State. Our child clients currently range in age from newborn to sixteen-years old and mirror the cultural diversity of New York. Second and third year law clinic students collaborate with St. John’s University psychology, education, and fine arts students, taking a multidisciplinary approach to representation.

<sup>2</sup> The Symposium as well as this *Law Review* issue are supported by Grant #2006-JL-FX-K023 awarded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice.

<sup>3</sup> Symposium speakers were Prof. Barbara Bennett Woodhouse, Prof. Martin Guggenheim, Prof. Susan Mangold, Prof. Twila Perry, Dr. Sandra Azar, Commissioner John Mattingly, Commissioner Kevin Ryan, Prof. Peter Margulies,

explore alternatives for improving child welfare.<sup>4</sup> The Symposium consisted of insightful presentations and panel discussions on topics including: the legal landscape of the child welfare system; the cognitive and linguistic components of cross-cultural human interactions in the system; the racial divide surrounding trans-racial adoption; law enforcement responses to child maltreatment; New York and New Jersey's child welfare agencies' efforts to ensure child safety and prevent family disintegration; and the challenges facing lawyers representing children.

At the St. John's Child Advocacy Clinic, we represent children who are the victims of child maltreatment. As child advocates, called "law guardians" in New York State, our representation is directed by the wishes of the children. Their voice is our guidebook; without expressing their wishes, there is an abyss that tempts others but cannot be fulfilled by anyone but a direct advocate. Children have their own thoughts, but it is too often that they go unasked—unasked about their wishes, unasked about their proposals for change, unasked about what is working and what is failing in the child welfare system. When children are given the chance to speak, they are nothing less than candid, and what they say, they say so brilliantly. So just as the law guardian is the voice of a child in court, a principal goal of the Symposium was to bring the sentiments of young people into the child welfare conversation. The Symposium opened with a short video in which youths' views of the child welfare system were expressed. We hope that those words as well as the rest of the Symposium's insights are a catalyst for revisiting the priorities of young people.

In order to memorialize the Symposium, this dedicated issue of the *St. John's Law Review* offers Professor Barbara Bennett Woodhouse's keynote remarks and other comments and proposals. On behalf of St. John's Law School, we extend our heartfelt thanks to all those involved in planning and carrying out the Symposium. The contributions of the panelists and participants enabled the Child Advocacy Clinic to host a productive and critical Symposium for the child welfare

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Dr. Lisa Aronson Fontes, and District Attorney Janet DiFiore.

<sup>4</sup> The Symposium was hosted by the St. John's Child Advocacy Clinic, and organized by Professors Elaine Chiu, Theresa Hughes, and Rosemary Salomone.

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community. We also thank the *St. John's Law Review* for its willingness to participate in this important endeavor.

This Symposium was one small step in a wide-ranging and multifaceted journey to improve the lives of children and families. As the St. John's Child Advocacy Clinic continues on this journey, we maintain our conviction that the players in the child welfare system cannot be the only ones directing the course for the children, but rather that the children must be given the opportunity to direct the course for themselves.