

Child Advocates 40th Anniversary Celebration

11:30 a.m.- 12:30 p.m. Tuesday, June 21

President Ora Hirsch Pescovitz

- Thank you so much for that warm and generous introduction.
- In so many ways, when I think of home, I think of Indianapolis and many of you – the people in this room.
- This is where I feel most rooted.
- This is where Mark and I raised our family.
- This is where I feel the deep connectedness of community.
- My deep appreciation and congratulations to Child Advocates. For forty years, this organization and the many people who support its mission have been the voice for thousands of children who are abused and neglected each year.

- As a long-time member of the National Council of Jewish Women, I am passionate about the many causes that NCJW supports and I am proud that NCJW had the incredible wisdom and vision under the leadership of Caron Goldstein at the Indianapolis Chapter of NCJW to conceive of the concept of Child Advocates, develop its mission, and deliver on its promise to change the lives of children.
- I see so many familiar faces here, and I have so many fond memories of my family's time in Indianapolis. I wish I could thank each of you, but for the sake of time, I can only mention a few.
- Thank you, Cindy (Booth), and your dedicated staff at Child Advocates for everything you do for children. And, of course, thank you Steven (Stolen) for inviting me to be here today, your important work at Child Advocates and your longstanding friendship. And, of course, thanks to Rob, as well.
- Thank you, Rabbi Sandi for your inspiration.... To this day, I am guided by your wisdom, ...and so appreciative of the spiritual leadership you and Rabbi Dennis have given to our

family over decades of our lives, including during the most important milestone events for our family.

- I know that we're also happy to have Rabbi Brett Krichiver from Indianapolis Hebrew Congregation and Rabbi Ben Sandrow from Congregation Sharrey Fefilla with us in community today.
- And, of course, I am forever indebted to Dr. Richard Schreiner, the former Chair of Pediatrics at Indiana University School of Medicine and physician-in-chief at Riley Hospital for Children, who first hired me to Indiana University and Riley Hospital in 1988. Rich, you continue to be a true friend and mentor.
- Also, I see Gil Peri...my successor as CEO of Riley Hospital for Children... Gil, thank you and your entire team for all that you and Riley do on behalf of Indiana's children and families.
- I see so many other dear friends from Riley, IU, the Jewish Community and the community at large. This is truly a homecoming for me...and I am grateful to all of you for

“coming out” to support my visit, and especially for supporting Child Advocates.

- I’m here today with my partner, Dan Walsh. Dan spent three years as a cardiologist at St. Francis during the time I was a senior vice president at Eli Lilly and Company from 2014-17, and Dan also grew to love and appreciate the terrific Indianapolis community.
- I am so proud to call myself a Hoosier.
- Once a Hoosier, always a Hoosier.

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- Today, I am so proud to return to Indianapolis to honor and celebrate Child Advocates and to share my thoughts on a topic that is at the heart of the challenge facing child advocates everywhere and really, a challenge that faces all Americans:

- **What kind of world do we want to live in.... and what kind of world are we handing to our children and our grandchildren?**
- As child advocates, we are ardent believers that we must work together for a better world....
- A more compassionate world...
- A world where we share responsibility for acting for the common good and for supporting those who are in need.
- There are many reasons for the social, economic, cultural and political problems plaguing our communities and our nation. And, if we think about the complexity and weightiness of those problems, it can be overwhelming and give us a feeling of helplessness.
- But as child advocates we know better. We are not easily overwhelmed.
- We don't wait for answers. We believe in action.

- The best way to make a difference in a child's life is to approach each child's situation as unique..... to help one child at a time, to stand up for the rights of children and those children who cannot stand up for themselves or who have been victimized or mistreated in some way. In the end, we set out to make each child feel the connectedness of belonging to a family and a community.
- Our aspiration is to create a world that puts an end to childhood poverty, homelessness, hunger, abuse, poor education and other forms of injustice.
- Idealistic. Hopeful. Determined.
- That's us.

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- Coming back to Indianapolis inspires so many fond memories.
- One cherished memory that is particularly salient as it relates to today's celebration comes from a talk that I gave

upon the occasion of being named to an Endowed Professorship at Indiana University made possible from a donation from the Estate of Edwin and Nora Letzter to the Riley Children's Foundation in 1998.

- Like the NCJW founders of Child Advocates, on that occasion, I also drew upon the deep connection to the Jewish principle of Tikkun Olam – the idea of repairing the world.
- Tikkun Olam sets forth a challenge, and confronts us with a simple question: What are each of us doing to make the world a better place?
- Repairing the world begins with words.
- But it is given strength by our commitments.
- And it is made real by our actions.
- Caron Goldsmith used that principle to establish Child Advocates. And I have been inspired by that principle during

my work at Riley Hospital, Indiana University and today, at Oakland University.

- In 1998, the executor of Edwin and Nora's estate was moved by my words and our work. And after that speech about Tikkun Olam, I received several gifts from the Estate of Edwin and Nora Letzter.

< NOTE: REVEAL THE PRAYER BOOKS.... >

- I received these.... Edwin Letzter's prayer books.

< NOTE: REVEAL THE RINGS.... >

- I received these..... Edwin's diamond ring, and Nora's 24-caret gold wedding band that symbolized her commitment to her marital vows.
- I was overwhelmed to receive these gifts.
- It has occurred to me that our commitment as child advocates – much like Edwin and Nora's lifetime

commitment to each other – is a pledge that requires our hearts and our souls.

- After that talk, Kevin O’Keefe, who was then CEO of the Riley Children’s Foundation, was inspired by the concept of Tikkun Olam, and had this memento made for me.

< NOTE: REVEAL THE MOMENTO.... >

- For me, these mementos are cherished reminders about the lasting power of Tikkun Olam...and over the years, they have provided encouragement to me.... and given me insight into how each of us plays a role in changing the world for the better – one person...one child at a time.

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- Our task as child advocates can be compared to the work of gardeners, particularly those who care for the often-times moody and not-so-easy-to-raise fig tree.
- It’s a metaphor that Rabbi Sasso has used in her amazing and compelling recent work with Amy-Jill Levine, “The Good

for Nothing Tree.” Their collaboration, inspired by the parable of the Barren Fig Tree, reminds us that the sweetest figs, like so many other things in life, are worth the wait.

- The lesson is clear: Children are not born a finished piece of work, but they require tending...nurturing. Simply....Children require our attention and love.
- Like a child struggling amid a difficult social environment, the tiny fig tree is weak, and easily uprooted in a strong storm, and possibly shaken by even a mild, unexpected tempest.
- But with care, cultivation and love, an amazing thing happens.
- As the fig tree perseveres the many ups and downs of the four seasons....it is strengthened.
- Among the vital ingredients needed to raise a healthy fig tree are sunshine and adequate room to grow.
 - Sunshine... perhaps that’s the faith we have in children to believe in themselves.

- And “room to grow”.... perhaps that’s the security children need to stretch their arms, expand their minds, deepen their souls and know they are loved.
- Child advocates, much like gardeners are, by nature, optimists.

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- While the core focus of Child Advocates here in Indianapolis is on consulting services, treatment, parenting support, providing adequate child care and defending their rights and liberties.... we must be mindful that children eventually become young adults.
- And we must make sure there are bridges to support them as they continue on their journeys.
- In my years in medicine, hospital administration and higher education, I have learned that there is no greater bridge that leads to opportunities and improved quality of life than education.

- Every day, from my position as president of Oakland University, I see the miracle and the power of education... Education provides more upward mobility than any other single factor and nowhere is that more apparent than in the story of the Bickers brothers from Detroit.
- Michael Bickers and his brother grew up in an east side Detroit neighborhood infamous for gang violence and the dearth of resources. What are the odds of a child making it out of that neighborhood?
- Michael's brother didn't.
- He was five years older than Michael. He was involved in neighborhood gangs. When he was in his teens, he was killed by gang violence...never having an opportunity to realize his full talents and potential.
- The same fate should have just as easily befallen Michael.
- But it didn't.

- Largely because Michael benefited from services similar to those offered by child advocates, he worked hard and was recognized for his academic and athletic potential. Because of the fostering of his abilities and self-focus, Michael was nurtured like the fig tree in Rabbi Sandy's story.
- He was selected as a teenager to attend the prestigious Cranbrook School and then Oakland University, where he earned a finance degree.
- A child advocate stepped in and made a fundamental difference, and that changed the trajectory of Michael's life.
- Now fast-forward...
- In February of this year, Michael was appointed regional president for PNC Bank in southeast Michigan after serving as a retail banking market manager. He has worked for PNC since 1990.
- Michael came to visit me a few weeks ago. He talked about how Oakland University impacted his life and how committed

he is to using the resources of PNC to invest in underserved communities, and to “give back.”

- Two brothers. Two different paths.
- What made the difference?
- Early childhood intervention in the form of child advocacy and the power of education.
- I'd like to share just one more story.
- Jared Barnett is one of three brothers.
- Jared transferred to Oakland University from a community college after graduating from Pontiac High School, located in Pontiac, Michigan, a city of about 60,000 people where more than half of the children under 18 years of age live in poverty... and where more than half of household families with children are headed by a female with no male presence, a stark contrast to Oakland County, where married couple households are the majority. By the way, Oakland County is the ninth wealthiest county in America.

- The Barnett parents died when Jared was just 13 years of age, leaving three sons.
- Three brothers.
- The oldest brother became intertwined in the life of the streets, and succumbed to a day-to-day subsistence.
- Jared was raised by his middle brother and supported by child advocates along the way.
- Remarkably, both Jared and his middle brother, despite not having a parent in their household, graduated from college. Three weeks ago, Jared graduated from Oakland University with a 3.92 GPA. Not only that, he worked full-time at a nearby hospital, and received one of the highest university awards we offer, the Alfred G. Wilson Award, for his leadership during the pandemic, and tutoring Pontiac students on academic and life skills.
- What made the difference in Jared's life?

- Two catalysts: Child advocacy and education.
- And, of course, Jared's amazing older brother.

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- I have been a university president now for five years. Never did I think I would have to work so hard to convince people of the need and value of a college degree.
- As we grapple with a world with too much poverty, too much economic inequality, and too much violence, the most effective defense against the negative waves of ignorance and intolerance is education, knowledge, civility and a deeper appreciation for the great diversity of cultures that make up the mosaic of humanity.
- When we look around, one thing is for sure: We have work to do.

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- As advocates, we must be mindful of the profound challenges facing children as they navigate a culture of increasing violence, isolation, apathy and mindless materialism.
- Compassion can make all the difference, but we cannot delude ourselves into believing that if only we were more compassionate, then the world would be a better place.
- Children everywhere face challenges that require a response and fundamental solutions. As child advocates, we must work together to find answers to pressing questions...
 - How do we ensure access to health care for all children?
 - Why is it that children of young mothers do not get the proper child care due to a lack of funding and other means of support?
 - Why are so many children not getting proper nutrition, and go hungry, and some must rely on after-school programs for their daily meal?

- Why do immigrant children face the daunting task of navigating what is often an intimidating and frustratingly bureaucratic American legal system?
- Why are so many children not getting proper education? And, what can we do for those children who are exasperated by the last two years of disrupted education because of Covid-19?
- What must be done to address income inequality and profoundly unequal K-12 public education systems around the country?
- And, finally, why do we still have to demonstrate the value and power of a college education and its potential to transform lives?
- As we seek answers, let's keep in mind the examples of Michael Bickers, Jared Barnett and other children.
 - They remind us of the task that each of us has accepted.

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- So, given the many challenges we face, how do we go about “repairing the world?”
- Our mission as child advocates illuminates our path ahead.
- For the past forty years, Child Advocates has been part of a proud and passionate movement that includes people who take responsibility to stand up.... to speak their minds... to fight against injustice and inequality in the world...and, of course, to advocate on behalf of children.
- The impact of the legacy is truly remarkable and demonstrated in so many success stories.....and yet, there is so much left to do.
- My years in medicine... at IU, at Riley Hospital... and then as the CEO at the University of Michigan Health System, and now as president at Oakland University have given me a first-hand view of the need to protect, defend and advocate on behalf of children and those who might not have the ability to advocate for themselves.
- Today, a pressing question has emerged:

- **How can we succeed as advocates in healing a country and a world with widespread political, racial, environmental and cultural conflicts and injustices where healing seems more like a distant ideal or dream rather than an achievable reality?**
- Perhaps we can find solace in contemplating the conditions necessary for the fig tree's ascent.
- Fig trees are a cornerstone of tropical forests, where they produce fruit year-round and provide food sources for thousands of animal species.
- Raising a fig tree, as Rabbi Sasso reminds us, provides a "life lesson."
- And that "life lesson" is that with patience, care, and love, we, as individuals and as "part of a movement of advocates," can cultivate a seed into a sapling...and a sapling into a fully-realized fruit-bearing plant.

- As child advocates we are proud idealists.... But we are also realists....for to heal the world, you must first see the world as it iswith your eyes open wide.
- Idealistic. Hopeful. Determined.
- And committed to repairing the world.
- That is who we are as people, advocates and champions....
 - ... that is also the lasting legacy of Child Advocates, which, for forty years has inspired us....
 - ...and has made a fundamental difference in all of our lives.
- Thank you.