

people we admire

This year, Ann Skelton, director of the Centre for Child Law at the University of Pretoria, was chosen as a candidate for the World's Children's Prize for the Rights of the Child.

My ambition as a child was to be the person who holds up a stop sign and helps children to cross the road. Later on, I wanted to be a vet – a bit unrealistic as I don't like the sight of blood – or a writer of fiction, or an actress.

I remember the day my father and I passed a queue of work-seekers outside a factory. He was the son of an English coal miner. My father said, 'Poor people; I remember what it was like, standing in a queue like that.' In that moment I knew that my family was no different from black families. We are all the same, worthy of respect.

After completing my law degree, I worked as a prosecutor in the juvenile court. It was 1986, and little kids could be arrested and held in prison for months on end.

Some arrived in court with open wounds, bitten by police dogs. I soon realised that my calling was defending the rights of poor, marginalised people, especially children.

When 13-year-old Neville Snyman was raped and beaten to death in jail in 1992, after breaking into a shop to steal sweets, chips and drinks, I felt compelled to do something that would have national impact. So I started the 'Free a Child for Xmas' campaign – a team of human rights lawyers ensured that 260 children went home that year.

My stand against apartheid made me a target for harassment; security police raided my office. I realised that I might be detained, so I made sure my husband, Peter, knew how to bottle-feed our baby.

At the Centre for Child Law we carefully select cases to set legal precedents, which institute systemic change. We liaise with organisations such as Childline, Child Welfare, Teddy Bear Clinic and RAPCAN, who bring systemic problems and serious injustices to our attention.

I laughed when the University of Pretoria nominated me for the World's Children's Prize. It seemed so unlikely that I would be selected. I loved meeting the jury children. I was struck by one interaction: the Israeli girl didn't know what to do with her tissues while she was on stage, so the boy from Palestine offered to keep them in his pocket. If only peace in the real world was so easily within our reach! ♣

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