

Court Attorney Coupé Earns Juvenile Law Certification

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REBEKAH HEARN | The Daily News

Thomas W. Coupé, a staff attorney at the Juvenile Court of Memphis and Shelby County, has been certified as a juvenile law and child welfare specialist by the Tennessee Commission on Continuing Legal Education and Specialization. He is one of only 10 attorneys statewide certified in this specialty by the Tennessee Commission.

Coupé also serves as the coordinator of the court's Judge's Action Center and is certified by the National Association of Counsel for Children as a child welfare law specialist.

Prior to working at Juvenile Court, Coupé was a court improvement attorney at the Tennessee Administrative Office of the Courts. He also previously was assistant general counsel for the Tennessee Department of Children's Services in Shelby, Rutherford and Williamson counties.

He received his bachelor's degree in political science from the University of Memphis in 1995 and his juris doctorate from the Southern Illinois University School of Law in 2003.



THOMAS W. COUPÉ
Position: Staff Attorney
Organization: Juvenile Court of Memphis and Shelby County
Basics: Coupé has been certified as a juvenile law and child welfare specialist by the Tennessee Commission on Continuing Legal Education and Specialization.

Q: What inspired you to work in child advocacy law?

A: It's funny, because I wanted to work as a prosecutor with the district attorney's office after I graduated from law school, but there weren't any openings. I ended up applying for a position as an attorney with the (Tennessee) Department of Children's Services representing the state in dependency and neglect cases, and was hired in January 2004. Since then, I have worked almost exclusively within the child-welfare realm. Although I never really planned to practice in this area, I couldn't imagine being happier practicing any other type of law.

Q: The Juvenile Court in February 2008 formed the Judge's Action Center. What is the purpose of the center, and what are your responsibilities as coordinator?

A: I first want to give credit to Judge (Curtis) Person (Jr.) for creating the concept of the Action Center and allowing me to be a part of the program. The Action Center serves as a liaison between the Juvenile Court and the public to help answer questions or address concerns for people who have issues involving Juvenile Court or child welfare-related matters. Nothing is off-limits for my office – the Action Center has helped people with matters such as addressing child support issues, answering docketing questions, locating community resources for parents and providing legal explanations of the court process for attorneys and parents – just to name a few. I find the position helpful and rewarding because the Action Center can serve as a problem-solving mechanism, not just as a sounding board, to help people with problems for which they can't otherwise find assistance.

Q: Were you required to be certified as a juvenile law and child welfare

specialist as a court employee?

A: No, there is no requirement that I, or anyone, need to be certified in order to practice this type of law. I just thought it was important for my personal and professional growth as an attorney to consistently challenge myself to be as knowledgeable as I can about my area of practice. The specialty in child welfare law is still relatively new, and very few people have sought certification in this area. To my knowledge, I am the only person in Shelby County who is certified by the Tennessee Commission in this specialty.

Q: What is one of the most difficult aspects of being a child advocate, especially in Memphis, where the juvenile crime rate is high and many children are raised in lower-income or single-parent homes?

A: I could talk for hours on this issue. I have come across some horrible situations involving children, and people often ask me if the constant barrage of sad situations makes me jaded. I do sometimes find it difficult to resist the temptation to compartmentalize my work, but I understand that I cannot be effective in this field if I choose to do that.

People who practice in this field need to understand that each case has far-reaching ramifications well beyond the case itself, and that every contact a child or family has with the court is an opportunity to affect those people's lives. That being said, I am often disappointed by those who devalue the importance of Juvenile Court, especially those in the legal profession who have never taken the time to take a case or to understand the impact the court has on the future of this city and county. A great number of young adults who have run-ins with the law in their 20s have had some sort of contact with DCS or the court as youths. It is very important that all members of the child welfare process – attorneys, social workers and local and state legislators, to name a few – understand that improving efforts to help children now will benefit many more people in the future.

Q: Do you take on pro bono cases?

A: I would like to take pro bono cases in the child welfare area, but it would conflict with my job. I do try, though, to assist people with questions about the legal process and will refer them to pro bono resources such as Memphis Area Legal Services and (its) Attorney of the Day program.

Q: Are you or have you been involved in any community organizations?

A: I try to make myself available to any organization that needs assistance with information or issues concerning Juvenile Court. I spoke to a job readiness class through the Tennessee Community Services Agency; I attended the Pro Bono Day Juvenile Court Clinic this past April; and I talked about Juvenile Court to children at Oakhaven Elementary. I am currently in the process of recruiting volunteers for the creation of additional Foster Care Review Boards, which are comprised of volunteers who meet and review the progress of children in the custody of the Department of Children's Services.