

# ARIZONA CAPITOL TIMES

**Darcy Olsen: A new generation of justice for foster kids**

By: [Katie Campbell](#) March 12, 2018 , 4:20 am



Darcy Olsen holds up a onesie that belonged to one of her foster daughters. (Photo by Katie Campbell/Arizona Capitol Times)

Even after seven years as a foster parent, Darcy Olsen still gets teary eyed talking about the children who have come into her life.

Not just for those the system has failed but also for the success stories.

Her current foster child was far below average in size and struggling at birth. Recently, a woman at the grocery store commented on how chubby he was – it was the greatest compliment she could have given Olsen.

Olsen was CEO at the Goldwater Institute for 16 years before her ouster last July. Her experience as a foster parent led the organization to take on the Indian Child Welfare Act and rules governing tribes' rights in cases involving Native American children.

Now, she has founded her own organization – Generation Justice – dedicated solely to the constitutional rights of foster children.

“There are fundamental rights that are missing for these children, and we are pioneering this movement,” Olsen said.

“There’s a lot of tragedy in the world that is not preventable, but this process is entirely preventable.”

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## Q&A

### **Tell me about what inspired Generation Justice.**

My second foster... she was a newborn, and she was drug exposed. Her case is my hardest one to talk about. ... I told one of the people involved in the case, “Will you please let me know when she comes back into the system?” It was not going to be a lasting placement. And unfortunately, I was right about that.

People always think foster parenting is hard because you fall in love with the children, and what they don’t realize is you’re not worried about you. When I put her in the van that took her away, what you’re thinking is, “They have no protection now.”

The system breaks these children. ... This is not something that their parents did to them. This is something that the state process does to children. ... These children could have had families, and that is why I founded Generation Justice. To bring this young generation of kids justice and to get them families.

### **Why do you think the problem has been allowed to persist for so long?**

The problems have been persistent, but the nature of them has become more cyclical, more entrenched and harder to get at because so many more of the modern cases involve really hard drugs and addiction. ... The problem has become generational, and I think the problem is allowed to persist because statutes can change and constitutional rights cannot. Not without a real movement. ... No one is really looking over the entire system.

One of the things that I think we’re going to be doing at Gen Justice is creating a network, a private sector check on these government actors. ... It’s not a model to have families have to cough up \$100,000 to enforce rights. I spent my savings to save (my daughter) – whatever, any mother would do that and I was lucky I had it – but what will be different 10 years from now.

**While you were at the Goldwater Institute, it really became a powerhouse in court. Are you going to replicate those legal efforts here?**

There's no question that we will have a legal component. To be an effective organization in the modern world, you've got to be able to get in there and change the laws, and you've got to be able to oversee the enforcement of those laws. There are a million people in the world looking out for the taxpayers. There's Gen Justice looking out for kids' constitutional rights.

**Do you see this going national?**

The reforms that we have come up with can be a blueprint in every state. ... I don't put any limits on the organization.

**Do you miss Goldwater at all?**

I am just exactly where I'm meant to be right now. ... These children need an advocate, and I am really grateful to be in a position where I can do that for them.

**Some sourness seemed to play out in the Yellow Sheet Report after your departure. How did you feel about how that ended?**

The show must go on. I'm not the first CEO to be terminated or to have differences with the board. My style is to lead and to do what I believe is right. When I went into Goldwater, we were \$1 million in the red, so I bailed the water out of the sinking ship and rebuilt the ship and charted a new course for that organization. ... We breathed new life into federalism. That is a movement that is lasting, and to me, that is what leadership is about.

**One source in the Yellow Sheet said your personal experiences as a foster mother had started driving the institute's policy ahead of your departure.**

Certainly, our work getting involved with the Indian Child Welfare Act was something I learned about because of becoming a mother, but that is a fundamental constitutional question. Who would any of us be to turn a blind eye to the most innocent when you're talking about lives on the line? ... Some people loved that, and some people wanted to focus on the minimum wage. And that's fine, too.

**I found another Yellow Sheet item from 2009 with a headline that described you as a "Goldwater gal." That sort of thing just makes me cringe. What has been your experience as a woman in your field?**

When a male has children, he is generally viewed as working harder and being more dedicated. And when a woman becomes a mother, she is viewed as less responsible and less productive. There's the old saying that women have to work twice as hard and produce twice as much to be thought half as good, and certainly, I have seen that happen to mothers.

If a father had gone in and seen a violation of constitutional rights as I did and brought it back, people would say, "Oh my gosh! What an amazing find. Can you believe we're going to pioneer work in this?" And apparently, someone criticized that as, "That's because she's a mother." That's absurd.

... (Generation Justice is) largely made up of working mothers, and many of our mothers have children with extreme special needs as I do. ... They are uber moms. They are uber workers. They find a way to get it done, and we benefit from that.