

# Something Had to Be Done

## How Annie Andrews led reform of the Charleston County Juvenile Detention Center BY REBECCA MARISCAL

Annie Andrews' first visit to the Charleston County Juvenile Detention Center as a public defender was a shock. "I was immediately just taken aback by the conditions of the facility," she says.

The building had been constructed in the '60s and never renovated. "There were plumbing issues where fecal matter and urine came up through the drains and into rooms where the kids slept on the floor due to overcrowding. There was barbaric punishment, all sorts of awful civil rights violations."

She would sit in a cold, dingy room across from her clients, children and teens dressed in striped jumpsuits, who would tell her about the conditions. "I feel like the way I'm being treated isn't right," they'd say. "I feel like no one cares about me. Why are you not doing anything about this?"

Other lawyers said the facility had been like that for as long as anyone could remember. Parents shared horrific stories of their own experiences when they were kids.

"There was this generational harm," Andrews says. "Sometimes our mission in life just sort of finds us through pure luck or happenstance, and in encountering that situation, I immediately knew something had to be done."

Andrews had worked in public defense for years, first as an administrative assistant to the chief public defender in Richland County, then trying violent crime cases at the Charleston County office.

"Some of these people were pleading guilty to offenses where they were definitely going to prison and there was a mandatory minimum, and they didn't have a soul in the world in the courtroom," she says. "It seemed like such an honor to have that trust from a client, to be that person that can

advocate for people who often don't have anyone else in their life."

It was a move to the family court division that first exposed her to the juvenile detention center. She reached out to the civil rights department and learned it had been investigating similar issues in detention centers across the country. Andrews decided her best route was a lawsuit.

She began speaking with families and gathering the necessary documentation for a civil rights case, then brought the story to a reporter at *The Post and Courier*, along with a list of potential witnesses who were willing to be interviewed. It was published on the front page of a Sunday edition. "It shook the community," Andrews says. "No one knew that this was happening in their backyard and happening to kids."

Nelson Mullins took the case, and Andrews left the PD's office to join Steinberg Law Firm, which served as co-counsel on the suit. It was filed in the summer of 2020, and the facility was shut down 18 days later. The kids were relocated to a safer building, and a new facility was set to open this spring. The case is still in mediation, but a new juvenile justice reform group is in place to do evaluations, and

the firm is working with the new sheriff to develop rehabilitative programs.

"We've started to see some ripple effects around the state, where I've heard counties are starting to look at their juvenile detention centers and trying to think, 'What can we do different? How can we improve this environment for kids?'" Andrews says.

These days Andrews focuses on representing people who have been victims of institutional abuse or neglect, including those in nursing homes or mental health facilities.

"That's my real passion, trying to find this vulnerable population and be an advocate for them," she says. "Nothing changes unless we challenge the status quo." SL



### The Power of Books

Annie Andrews remembers sitting with a 15-year-old client at the Charleston County Juvenile Detention Center, asking what she did with her time. "I said, 'Why aren't you reading anything?' and she said, 'They don't have any books to read here.'"

The library amounted to a few small shelves of books, many of them cookbooks or reference material. So she and a colleague, Meagan Gentry, started a book drive, reaching out to local libraries, teachers, parents and the state bar. "I don't think we had a grasp on how generous everyone would be," Andrews says. They collected about 4,000 books, more than could fit in the center, so they shared with centers in Greenville and Columbia.

"Reading is such a powerful tool in that you can gain insights into your life, into your community," Andrews says. "It was really special and heartwarming to talk to kids, after they had a library, about reading."



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