



Yellowjacket Heroes – Walter Stokely – class of 2005

Public Defenders are a vital part of our justice system, providing legal representation to those who cannot afford to hire legal counsel. **2005 CHS graduate Walter Stokely** has been a public defender since 2013 and was featured in a series in the Kansas City Star last year highlighting the challenges of a severely understaffed and overworked office. Just a few months prior to the arrival of the coronavirus in the Kansas City area, Walter was named as the District Defender for the Kansas City Children's Team. Walter and his team represent juveniles who have gotten involved with the Jackson County Circuit Court. This work is particularly important as the legal rights of youth are a specialized aspect of the law and the impact of the legal process on a youth can have ramifications that are lifelong for the young person. Walter's job is to ensure that due process is followed for their clients and that the focus remains on coming to a resolution that follows the law, but also gives the young person the best opportunity to become a productive and contributing member of society.

The coronavirus has impacted Walter's work in three significant ways. First, a key element to proper representation is to develop a high trust relationship between the attorney and their client. When face to face meetings are limited or impossible due to visitation policies, this task becomes even more difficult than normal. Secondly, the youth are often held in detention while their case is processed. The environments of jails are ripe for becoming infected by the coronavirus, so a priority has been to make sure that all efforts are made get youth released while the process moves along unless there are absolutely no other alternatives. Finally, the use of technology and restrictions on in person meetings makes it difficult to protect the due process rights of a defendant. Walter and his team work to make sure that decisions made in the interest of health do not damage the legal rights of their clients.

Walter's interest in social justice started at a young age. The combination of socially active parents and the diverse environment in the Center School District helped Walter develop tremendous empathy for the different life experiences of people in his community, especially those who did not have the stable family and home environments that he enjoyed. During the summer following his first year of law school, Walter had an internship at the Department of Natural Resources. He spent the summer at a desk researching and writing reports. He quickly realized that his extroverted nature needed a career that involved more interaction with people than with books. He is forever grateful to the DNR for helping him identify what he didn't want to do for a career! After his second year in law school he interned at the Public Defenders office and quickly realized that this was his calling. The rest, as they say, is history.

While his work as a regular public defender was important, the structure of the system makes it impossible to provide adequate representation and that makes it a very frustrating job. Walter is grateful to be able to move into the Children's team where the caseloads are more manageable and he is better able to impact the lives of his clients in a positive way.

Thanks to Walter Stokely and all our Yellowjacket Heroes for their service and caring for our communities.