

The Seattle Times

Sunday, December 14, 1997 - Page updated at 12:00 AM

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Pat Gogerty -- A Determined Journey To Childhaven -- A Tireless Advocate For Kids Who Made The Best Of His Own Abusive Childhood Is Retiring From The Agency He Led To Prominence

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Patrick Gogerty grew up the angry child of an alcoholic father who beat him and a fortune-teller mother who parked him in foster care. This is the story of how he used political skill and high-level connections, hitched to his single-minded conviction, to build the state's premier organization for treating the youngest victims of abuse and neglect.

It is the story, too, of how one man grappled with how to make a difference, as a way of making sense of his miserable childhood.

And how he gradually came to the idea - when it was still revolutionary - that to change the course of a child's life, society must step in at the earliest age.

Gogerty, 68, is retiring in March as executive director of Childhaven. His successor is to be named next month, and already some wonder if the organization can hold its own without his clout. In only 20 years, he created the model nonprofit program - and made Childhaven a household name with an almost Mother Teresa-like aura.

Moreover, he, more than anyone, forced this community to face what 20 years earlier it had largely denied: that child abuse, far from being "family business," is everyone's business.

All along, Gogerty has been trying to answer a basic and elusive question - one key to his work and life: Why does one child, growing up in the worst circumstances, become a productive adult, while another lashes out in violence?

Pat Gogerty managed to escape the abyss. But how? And what support in a child's life can make a difference?

Maybe, he says, the "Rosetta Stone" is to be found at Childhaven.

In considering the evolution of Pat Gogerty, start with these three moments in his life:

-- 1938: When Gogerty was about 9, his parents borrowed a car and drove him to a farm near Kent - and then told him he was being put into foster care. In the next two years, his parents never once called or wrote.

By his second and third time in foster care - once with an ex-con, later at work on a farm for a religious fringe group - he became inured to the pain. Once home, he became the caretaker he never had: raising baby brother

Bob, who would grow up to become "kingmaker" political adviser to some of the state's top business and political interests.

-- 1979: Gogerty had asked the state Legislature for \$250,000 for a pilot "therapeutic child care" program to provide specialized treatment for abused and neglected infants and toddlers.

The bill was dead - stuck in the House rules committee. Gogerty called a friend to ask a favor.

An expert pollster who donated his services to gain the good will of politicians, Gogerty had worked with Vito Chiechi, the Republican chief clerk of the House of Representatives, on Wes Uhlman's campaign for governor against Dixy Lee Ray in 1975. (Brother Bob had been deputy when Uhlman was Seattle mayor.)

Chiechi got the bill to the Senate, which was overwhelmingly Democratic, and Childhaven was launched.

-- 1995: The mother of Lauria Grace, a 3-year-old in treatment at Childhaven, suffocated her child by strapping her down and stuffing a sock in her mouth.

Childhaven repeatedly had told the state Department of Social and Health Services that Lauria was in danger. The state caseworker and supervisor who had questioned the cultural relevancy of Childhaven for an African-American child had taken no action.

An independent-review committee found fault with most DSHS players involved in the case, but overall blamed "the system."

A furious Gogerty told the press that was excuse-making: "People failed. You talk about systems failing when your computer doesn't work. A child died here."

Never mind that he had the head of DSHS screaming at him on the phone; never mind that DSHS provides much of Childhaven's funding. It was a classic Gogerty response.

"When it comes to the death of kids, there is no compromise."

What unites these incidents?

Pat Gogerty's childhood gave him the sensitivity and will to fight for children who can't fight for themselves. His political education enabled him to link do-gooding with getting good done. But in the end, he has remained a maverick. The fire still burns.

His office is up a narrow stairway in a 1912 home at 316 Broadway in Seattle, a forlorn building that craves a paint job, its security-barred windows speaking of the societal disarray that generates "business" for Childhaven.

The two newest of the four Childhaven branches - in Auburn and Burien - are modern and comfortable, but here at the central office, which first housed Childhaven's precursor, Seattle Day Nursery, they make do.

Gogerty's office, with vinyl furniture from Boeing surplus and a ratty cloth curtain serving as the door to a coat closet, still bears the airplane-theme decor of a Boeing executive volunteer who took it over for a while.

Gogerty, paunchy, with stark white hair, has a face you'd guess was Irish even if you didn't know his name. "Strong silent type," says son Rod. (Though when he does speak, says Childhaven associate director and companion Maggie Kennedy, he's likely to spin off Shakespeare, history, poetry and philosophy.)

He comes across as open, vulnerable even. He knows that any publicity about him is publicity about Childhaven. And he's feeling at loose ends; a heart attack and bypass surgery have pushed him to retire. He's not sure what he's going to do next.

"This is like a friend dying, to leave this place."

When people wax nostalgic about old Seattle, they forget some things. Gogerty, growing up in the '30s and '40s, saw the less-innocent side. There was no Child Protective Services or laws against child abuse in those days.

Gogerty and his four brothers were at the mercy of their father - a smart, angry drunk who frequently beat his wife and children until, late in life, he found Alcoholics Anonymous.

This was a time, recalls Noreen Skagen - a longtime Seattle policewoman who would become U.S. marshal and a board president of Childhaven - when the women's bureau of the Seattle Police Department dealt with abused children.

"Until the late '60s, when we got CPS, I saw abused children who died, many times. Children so traumatized, so abused by their parents they couldn't talk to you, couldn't function, almost catatonic out of fear. There were 21 of us policewomen. We crawled into attics, finding children lying on filthy mattresses . . ."

They'd take the children to a youth center that also housed delinquents; some would go on to foster care. "If they were really severe, we took them to Harborview."

No authority intervened for the Gogerty boys. At times, the parents, overwhelmed - Gogerty's father kept losing railroad jobs because of his drinking - would send the boys away.

"If you wanted to find my mother," Gogerty says one of his brothers would joke, "go to the Greyhound station." She was in demand up and down the coast as a reader of cards and tea leaves.

When Gogerty was 16, his father came home drunk one night. "He was going to whale on my mom and us. I punched him. Broke one of his ribs." His mother, as the ambulance pulled away, told him he'd better leave for everyone's good.

The Boys Club rescued him. Boxing and basketball soaked up his aggressions. And two men, role models whom Gogerty describes as "responsible, straight-arrow guys raising their kids," saved his life.

One of them, Frank Wilson, was instrumental. Last year, shortly after Wilson's death, Gogerty brought Wilson's wife and two daughters to a Childhaven meeting. He wanted board members to see the difference one person can make.

The Army continued to straighten him out.

He was drafted in 1950, put to work in a locked ward for disturbed soldiers, then given a crash course in psychiatric social work.

After the Korean War, on the GI Bill, he studied psychology and theology at Seattle University, "because I wanted to resolve some conflicts about religion."

Did he?

"You don't find `the answer.' I find I can't say there isn't a purpose to life. Maybe the meaning of life is to live life as decently and kindly as you can."

He quit college as a senior, however, was married, and five years later divorced. He put his youngest brother, Bob, through Catholic high school.

He worked a number of jobs, including athletic director at the Boys Club. Then in 1956, he landed the first of several jobs that would become steppingstones to Childhaven - working with emotionally disturbed children at Seattle's Ryther Child Center.

He spent four years there, then six years working with delinquents at Luther Burbank School for Boys on Mercer Island, a place he described as so primitive that kids being punished used tin cans as toilets.

It was known then that most of the children had been sexually or physically abused, but few experts were making clear connections between abuse and subsequent emotional problems and delinquency.

"I didn't know why people become what they are," Gogerty said. "I thought if they received positive help they'd be OK. That was naive. It's far more complex than that."

While at Burbank, where brother Bob also worked for a time, Gogerty discovered politics as the way to get things done.

Shaken by the assassination of President Kennedy in 1963, Pat and Bob Gogerty, along with a group of other Burbank staff, backed Dave Warmuth for state representative from the 48th District, thinking he'd plead their cause if he were elected. "He was Catholic; he had good values, was a decent fellow."

"We wanted a radical overhaul in how these kids were dealt with."

Warmuth lost, but Pat and Bob stayed in the game. Politics became Bob's life. For Pat, it became the means to get kids treatment.

Bob says Pat was good at politics because he had learned to tune in to the meaning behind people's words: "With emotionally disturbed kids, they say one thing, mean another. They may only know how to be angry. You think they want to push you away. But no, they really want you to come in."

Frustrated by a lack of progress, Gogerty took a break from social services.

Then, in 1973, newly remarried, he became executive director of Seattle Day Nursery, an agency first opened in 1909 by a Presbyterian minister to care for children whose poor mothers "had to work from necessity." The nursery was facing hard times. The federal government was cutting child-care funds for poor workers.

Gogerty took a hard look at the mission; it was no longer unique. Several other groups had begun low-income child care.

He looked for a new direction.

At this same time, the federal government was making available grants for combating child abuse, while CPS workers in Rainier Valley told Gogerty they needed a way to deliver children to care.

Meanwhile, Gogerty had seen fledgling research showing how much the young are affected by early lack of nurturing.

He also thought about the older kids at Ryther and Burbank, and how they shared backgrounds of neglect and abuse.

"Things began to jell."

In 1977, Seattle Day Nursery began a pilot program with 10 abused or neglected children.

The basic components of the program were (and continue to be at Childhaven today): Each child was transported daily to and from the program, for high-quality care and three meals. Under one roof there was a nurse and speech, physical and play therapists. Parents were offered support and education.

Eventually the program would extend countywide for children 1 month to 5 years old. (More than 400 were served last year.) Childhaven would add a drug-affected infant program and a crisis nursery providing respite care for stressed families or as parents entered substance-abuse treatment.

The early years were lean, associate director Laura Sheehan remembers, but Childhaven survived.

At one point, Gogerty hauled leftover fish from a Scandinavian festival to feed the children; the fish stayed cold enough to eat packed in ice over a weekend, but Gogerty's car never shed the stink.

"As deputy mayor," says Bob, "I finagled something like 10 CETA people (federally funded workers) to supplement his budget; Childhaven was almost the biggest recipient of CETA outside the government."

During this same period, Gogerty's personal life turned upside down. In November 1979, his wife left and he became the primary parent for their three children, ages 4, 6 and 8.

For five more years, he continued to commute from Sultan, where they'd moved because his wife wanted to live on a farm.

In 1980, he ran for the state Senate and lost badly. "It was one of the dumber things I've done."

Meanwhile, the hours at Childhaven took a personal toll.

Son Rod, 26, recalls his father's 12-hour days and long commute.

But Rod, as well as Patrick, 22, a Colorado college student, and Hattie, 24, who manages a Denny's restaurant, say the time they had with their father was quality time. "That's a big catch phrase, but it was," says Rod, a manager at a stove manufacturing shop. "He did an outstanding job, for the circumstances," says Hattie.

As the years went on, Gogerty's ex-wife descended into alcoholism, depression and ultimately suicide, making his role all the more crucial.

Gradually, the Childhaven pieces fell into place, a combination of luck and pluck. Observers describe a cunning but sincere master plan. By all accounts, Gogerty was relentless and highly persuasive.

The starting point was a well-run, cutting-edge organization of dedicated believers with a compelling mission: saving children.

Unlike many social agencies with a palette of services and a fuzzy image, Childhaven kept a single focus. And it didn't attract much competition, says YWCA executive director Rita Ryder, because the work is specialized and expensive.

Essential, says his old ally, Rep. Jim McDermott, was that Gogerty mastered the art of public relations. Whether it was Life magazine coverage or the blessing of Barbara Bush, "he worked the publicity so people could see they were with a winner."

He commissioned research that tracked how the program turned children's lives around, putting him ahead of most other social-service agencies when funders began demanding such proof.

He convinced the community that Childhaven was their organization. Instead of hiding behind privacy concerns as many agencies do, Gogerty opened the doors so funders and the community knew where their money was going.

Then, says McDermott, Gogerty "methodically went after the people he wanted on that board."

Sometimes luck was involved.

Kappa Kappa Gamma sorority chose to support Childhaven, and one sorority sister, Lou Lovsted, became board president. She, in turn, persuaded her second cousin, Harriet Schrontz, to join, and Schrontz eventually became board president. Initially, her husband, Frank, was a Boeing vice president. Then he zoomed to the top at Boeing, and Harriet eventually would persuade him to have Boeing lend Childhaven \$3 million to build the Auburn center (which would be named after Gogerty, much to his chagrin).

Schrontz also put "serious Boeing people on Pat's board," as Bob puts it. "Frank said to his people, do what needs to be done." A well-placed call assured that Perkins Coie, Boeing's law firm, was delighted to do Childhaven's legal work for free. When the child-care workers were organizing a union, Gogerty tapped into a Boeing labor expert.

He cultivated a political following, too, brother Bob noted. "He was friends with all the mayors and governors."

Gogerty had been a friend of McDermott since the now-congressman first ran for the state Legislature in 1970. He was chairman of McDermott's campaign when he ran (and lost) for governor in 1972. "When McDermott became chairman of Ways and Means," notes Bob, "he had a powerful friend."

It was McDermott who saved Childhaven from being sliced out in 1985.

He came onto the floor waving the December 1984 issue of Life magazine with Princess Diana on the cover and featuring a story on Childhaven and a child the agency had saved.

"The boy had come to the CPS worker's attention because he had a broken arm," recalls Gogerty. "His mom had put his little brother in the dryer for wetting his pants and he broke his arm getting his brother out. His parents had been brutalized as children. The father was a slaughterhouse worker who didn't change his bloody clothes for four days straight."

Meanwhile, Pat benefited from reflected glory of brother Bob's rise to power, as Bob became the political engineer for the likes of Seattle Mayor Norm Rice, Gov. Mike Lowry and proponents of Seattle's sports stadiums.

Of course, not everyone appreciated Pat Gogerty's political savvy. Some organizations, and especially some DSHS bureaucrats, have resented Childhaven for what they perceive as wrangling more than its share of the always-scarce resource pie for social services.

But today, Childhaven is seen as a model, followed in this state by more than 20 centers. So accepted is it that it ranks as the third most popular agency for United Way donors (behind Planned Parenthood and Catholic Community Services).

A look at some of the top Childhaven people tells you something about Gogerty. Many have been with the organization from the beginning, and they remind you a little of religious converts on a mission.

Maggie Kennedy is Childhaven's fierce mother hawk, more flamboyant and less polite than Gogerty.

She hates the word "help" ("who are we to `help'? We might see some options they don't see; you can be useful"); ditto the word "enable." She's banned the word "clinical" - "that's done for self-esteem." And please don't tell her about Ph.D.'s. "We had two Ph.D.'s. Worse we ever had. I don't hire social workers, either."

The CPS: "I call it Parent Protective Service."

Kennedy says she's staying two more years after Gogerty leaves to ease the transition. "I'll stay until I'm sure there's not going to be a hierarchical system or a `medical' system where people are looking at `pathologies' or `deficits.' "

Gogerty doesn't share all of Kennedy's views. Not exactly.

Ask about DSHS, and he turns on his Irish brogue and tells the story of an old man who is dying, and the priest asks: Does he renounce the devil and all his works? And the man says, "At a delicate time like this, Father, I don't want to offend anyone."

But, he says, every organization needs someone like Kennedy - someone with passion. Laura Sheehan, the other associate director, is his analytical person, he says, and Maggie is the passion person.

Debra Ronnholm, director of the Eli Creekmore Memorial Branch, carries on an interview while simultaneously dealing with a child who's triggered a false fire alarm and a child who has lice.

By her desk are photos of Lauria Grace, who when she died of child abuse was enrolled at this Childhaven branch.

"It rocked me to the core of my being," Ronnholm says of Lauria's death. "I thought a child who came to Childhaven would never die."

When she feared she couldn't continue, Gogerty supported her. "He never said, `Don't think that way.' He said, `I understand.' "

He also went to Olympia and came back reporting changes, including an 800 number people could call if they thought they weren't being heard when they'd tried to report child abuse.

Gogerty's efforts helped Ronnholm go on. "I learned a great deal how people survive; how resilient the human spirit can be."

Over the years, the need for an agency like Childhaven has only grown.

Today, 86 percent of Childhaven families are affected by drugs; 55 percent of Childhaven's children are in foster care. Heroin has replaced crack as the drug of the moment. Domestic violence continues to rise.

But the success stories continue, too. There was the 4-month-old who came to Childhaven, spongy, no muscle tone, flat expression; he would scream for hours, his hair dead white and like straw. The mother said she never picked him up because she was afraid she'd kill him.

Within months, the child changed. And his mother eventually left her abusive partner, got a part-time job and was doing well with him.

A long-term study followed a group of 60 children, half of whom randomly received Childhaven services, the other half regular CPS services.

Twelve years later, the Childhaven clients (now teenagers) were far less likely to be aggressive, angry or in trouble with the law. The most telling statistic: Only 3.7 percent of the Childhaven children group had been arrested for serious or violent crimes, compared with 23.8 percent of the others.

If Childhaven's relationship with the community has been sunny, its relationship with DSHS has grown increasingly difficult.

The tug is partly over philosophy, mostly over control of money. And anger lingers over the death of Lauria Grace.

Early on, Childhaven and DSHS worked together closely and well, says Sheehan, but that changed in the mid-1980s. Sheehan says the crack epidemic caused caseloads to grow and become more difficult, and Childhaven - with its \$14,000-a-year tab per child - to be seen by some as Cadillac service. Sheehan says pressure increased on Childhaven to process more quickly the ever-growing number of needy kids, a pressure it resisted.

Rosie Oreskovich, an instant DSHS secretary - and someone Childhaven considers a supporter and "good guy" surrounded by bad bureaucrats - says the tension between Childhaven and DSHS isn't necessarily a bad thing. "When resources are limited and expensive, we ought to be asking questions. There can be a difference in treatment philosophy."

The state wants to emphasize prevention rather than expensive treatment, she says, and is questioning where to direct prevention dollars. She says there are now more family-support programs that can be seen as Childhaven competitors.

Childhaven can point to recent research showing that all but the most intensive and child-oriented family-support programs have been ineffective in helping the neediest children's development.

Still, budget pressures clamor for cheaper alternatives.

Meanwhile, Childhaven workers still deeply resent that Lauria Grace's caseworker was not fired. ("She was demoted for a year," says Oreskovich. "She did (come back to her original job), and then she quit. The pain she suffered was unbelievable.")

Childhaven cried foul when a fatality-review committee said both DSHS and Childhaven needed to be more culturally sensitive.

Oreskovich responds: "Do I think Childhaven needs to work better with the African-American community? I do. I've told Pat that. They're trying to reach out more to the African-American community . . .

"Do I think they work well with African-American children? Yes, I think they do."

"I respect Pat," says Oreskovich. "He's worked hard to keep the child in focus. Have I gotten mad at him? Yeah. That's OK."

She adds: "I'm concerned when he leaves. He's developed a program and a model, but his ability to get the community and the Legislature involved and committed to it, a lot is him. Will his successor be able to do that?"

It's often been said that if children could vote, budgets would look a whole lot different.

But Gogerty says the candidates to replace him as executive director look good. Childhaven, he says, is more than Pat Gogerty. "There's \$13 million a biennium that goes into the (statewide) therapeutic child-care program; it can't be propped up by me. I think it will stand on its own."

It all goes back to one of the tenets of his philosophy: "Reasonable people will do the right thing. I still believe that.

"That's why I need to retire," he adds with a twinkle. "You can't think these crazy thoughts forever."

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