

Children Rescued From Cult

Amy, a *pro-bono* client of Dorsey & Whitney, is the mother of three children, all U.S. Citizens. Her ex-husband is the father of all three children. At the time Dorsey took the case in June 2007, the children were 8, 10, and 13 years old.

Amy and her husband were both born into a notorious worldwide cult called The Children of God, a.k.a. The Family International. By all accounts, this cult currently has approximately 10,000 members living worldwide from Thailand to Brazil, including the U.S. When Dorsey took the case, Amy and her estranged husband were both living in the U.S., although both had been shuttled all over the world by the cult throughout their childhoods and young adult lives, which is reportedly one of the many ways that this cult keeps people from joining mainstream society. Amy had managed to leave the cult and was living nearby her husband, who was running a communal cult home. They were separated and followed an informal custodial arrangement with the children.

Then in January 2007, Amy began speaking out in the national media about the horrendous abuse that she and many others had suffered as children growing up in the cult at the hands of its notoriously cruel, sadistic leader and his cohorts. Allegedly in retaliation, her husband cut off Amy's access to their three children, and he then filed for divorce and full custody of all three children. At the same time, Amy received reports that her children were being abused and threatened by other cult members residing in the father's communal cult home; and she began to worry that the father might kidnap the children away to Brazil. Such kidnappings had been reported in prior similar cases, and it was widely believed that the cult encouraged and facilitated them. According to many ex-members, the threat of losing one's children is another way that the cult has kept people trapped and prevented them from leaving or speaking out about abuse.

Amy was unable to afford a lawyer, so our Southern California office provided full representation throughout the case on a *pro-bono* basis. Immediately after taking the case, Dorsey requested and obtained temporary orders giving Amy full custody of all three children, with monitored visitation to the father. The family court also ordered a full

custody evaluation to be conducted, with the father to bear the cost subject to reallocation at trial. After a four-month custody evaluation, extensive written discovery, several lay- and expert-witness depositions, discovery motions resulting in significant sanctions against the father and his attorney, numerous ex-parte applications for interim relief on various issues (such as enrolling the children in school), a nine-day pre-trial evidentiary hearing, and several rounds of settlement negotiations, the case was set for a ten-day trial starting October 28, 2008.

During the course of the evidentiary hearings, the father was impeached numerous times (at one point, the judge even commented negatively regarding his credibility), and the Dorsey team exposed on public record many negative and damaging facts about the cult. Finally, after a history in the case of little or no compromise, on the eve of trial the father offered to settle giving full custody of all three children to Amy. She accepted this offer and then allowed Dorsey to negotiate further for a detailed custodial arrangement, incorporating comprehensive safeguards for the children's safety and requiring the father to take his fair share of responsibility for time and financial resources. The father must also bear the significant cost of the custody-evaluator's fee.

Throughout the course of the litigation and afterwards, several other ex-cult-members commented that hundreds, perhaps thousands, of current and former members of the Children of God/Family International were watching Amy's case. This is because many of them are also battling for parental rights after leaving the cult, and many others have reportedly expressed fears that they must risk losing their children if they wish to leave. Also, many recount being told from childhood that mainstream society is full of evil people who will only hurt them and never help them. Dorsey's *pro-bono* work for Amy proved these lies wrong and helped to empower many people.