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NEW VISIONS FOR PUBLIC AFFAIRS

VOLUME 6, SPRING 2014

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Advocating for Justice and Equality: An Interview with Ashley Biden

M. Kristen Hefner
University of Delaware

With her father the sitting Vice President and her brother Delaware's Attorney General, Ashley Biden grew up in a political family. Instead of entering politics, however, she has chosen to dedicate her career to improving the lives of others. Biden earned a master's degree in social work from the University of Pennsylvania in 2010 and previously worked for the West End Neighborhood House in Wilmington, Delaware and the Delaware Department of Services for Children, Youth, and their Families.

Biden is Associate Executive Director of The Delaware Center for Justice (DCJ), a non-profit agency whose work aims to improve justice and safety for Delawareans. The activities of the DCJ include implementing programs and services, educating the public, conducting research and engaging in advocacy. Initiatives of the non-profit organization include a Truancy Reduction Program, an Adult Victim Services Program, a School Diversion Program, a Community Re-entry Services Program, a Gun Violence Intervention Program, and Project Reach - which works with incarcerated women and their children. The DCJ collaborates and establishes partnerships with other agencies and organizations to address policy issues facing Delawareans. Partners include the Delaware Department of Justice, the Delaware Department of Correction, faith-based organizations, and community-based agencies.

In the following interview¹, Ashley Biden discusses factors that have influenced her interest in improving the lives of others and how that interest manifests itself in the current work of the Delaware Center for Justice.

The editorial board of *New Visions for Public Affairs* would like to thank Ashley Biden for taking the time to participate in this discussion, and for providing an example of successfully combining personal passions with creating a more equitable world in which to improve the lives of others.

Background and Current Position

Hefner²: Given your education and work background, it is evident that you have an interest in and have dedicated your life to improving the lives of people in your communities. What factors, throughout your life, have influenced this interest?

¹ *Editor's Note*: The full transcript of this interview appears here in abridged form, cut for space restrictions in the journal. Text that appears in [brackets] includes language or words added by the editorial board to ensure clarity, add context and improve flow.

² M. Kristen Hefner is an Associate Editor for *New Visions for Public Affairs*. She interviewed Ashley Biden on March 5, 2014.

Biden: Wow...where do I begin? I grew up watching my father. I had a father who was a public servant and a policymaker and who worked on issues that he was really passionate about. And [I spent] a majority of my childhood campaigning [chuckles] around Delaware, knocking on doors and talking to people and hearing my father talk to people about issues that were important to them. I think, you know, from a young age I learned that I could be a change agent. It started with my passion for animals. [Laughs] It was a time [when] dolphins were getting caught in nets while fishermen were catching tuna. And so every night when my father would come home, I would ...talk about how we needed to save the dolphins. So, in 1989 he introduced me to then -Congresswoman Barbara Boxer, who was behind the Dolphin Protection Consumer Information Act. And I actually got a chance to go on to the House floor with posters and tried to get primarily Republican Congressman to vote for the Act. And so that was kind of my first introduction into the fact that you could be a change agent.

I also was really interested in animal testing. I had the privilege of going to a Quaker School: I went to Wilmington Friends School. I had all my classmates write letters to then – I don't know if this company is still in existence, I'm embarrassed to say – but Bonne Bell [Cosmetics] – who [made] Bonne Bell lip-gloss. I had all my classmates write letters to the company [advocating] against animal testing. I went to a grade school that taught us about civil rights at a young age and encouraged students to be advocates and to be activists, and to follow their passion. And so that was something that I got on both sides: at home I was encouraged to follow my passion and to work on issues that were important to me and that I was passionate about. And I got that also from school.

Hefner: Has your thinking about social issues changed over time at all? And, if so, in what ways?

Biden: Well, I think it started originally when I [was] really young – it started with animals. But, then I started to do some work at my first job when I was in college, my freshman year, at Girls Incorporated, which is now Kingswood Academy. I was a camp counselor there, and that had a real lasting impact on me because I bonded with one student, in particular – his nickname was 'Pinky.' His mother lived in Riverside, [and] worked multiple jobs to feed the family. He needed a lot of attention and support. After camp, I would hang out after hours and hang out with him. So, it started with animals and then my passion became children.

I also worked at a summer program at Georgetown University, [through] which we worked with youth from Anacostia. After college, I worked at Northwestern Human Services Children's Reach Clinic and I was clinical support staff there. So I assisted youth and their families with accessing various resources in the community and worked directly with psychiatrists and therapists. And that's when I started to have a real interest in learning more about mental health. I took a class at the University of Pennsylvania through their School of Social Policy & Practice and the class was on the DSM-IV, which is now the DSM-V³. It kind of took off from there. When I took the class on the DSM-IV, I realized that I wanted to become a social worker. After I completed about four years at Northwestern Human Services in Philly, I worked at West End Neighborhood House through the Life Link Program as an Education and Employment Specialist for youth aging out of foster care for about a year. And then [I] got a job at the state where I worked for five years as an Employment and Education Liaison for adjudicated youth developing various employment [and] job skills training programs. And that's what's kind of led me to where I am now as the Associate Executive Director of the Delaware Center for Justice.

Hefner: Can you talk a little bit about the Delaware Center for Justice⁴ and your role there?

³ *Editor's Note:* The DSM-V is the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, which was updated in 2013. The reference book is used by mental health professionals as a mental health classification and diagnostic tool.

⁴ *Editor's Note:* For more information, visit the Delaware Center for Justice at <http://www.dcjustice.org/>.

Biden: I oversee all direct service programming. We are a non-profit agency and we provide direct service programming, education, and advocacy for youth and adults whose lives have been impacted by the criminal justice system. So we work with victims of crime, Court of Common Pleas clients who are eligible for mediation, adjudicated youth, truant youth, youth eligible for diversion programs, older prisoners, and adults on probation and parole - many of whom were victims at one point in time.

Juvenile Justice

Hefner: You've dedicated your life's work to improving the lives of people, specifically at-risk youth and their families, in our communities. And you have talked some about your interest in mental health and how that grew. What led to your interest in youth specifically?

Biden: Youth are our future. I believe there is so much potential and so much untapped potential. When I went to get my master's in Social Work my real interest was looking [at] inequality, and specifically, structural inequality - the long-standing differential treatment of those with characteristics that are highly correlated with race, such as poverty. So I really wanted to look at leveling the playing field and giving youth equal opportunities in terms of education and employment.

Hefner: One of the focus areas of the Delaware Center for Justice is improving juvenile justice within the state. Why is focusing on improving juvenile justice in Delaware important?

Biden: There are a lot of long-term consequences [of] being involved with the justice system that really impact...educational opportunities and future jobs, and just overall quality of life.

We are an organization that believes in second chances and that everybody makes mistakes. Often, youth and people in general can be products of their environment. And we really believe in progress, not perfection. Kids who end up in the juvenile justice system tend to come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, have lower access to educational opportunities, access to education and mental health treatment and substance abuse treatment. And so that's why it's so important to focus on providing those resources so that youth can fulfill their dreams. They have dreams and passions and they made mistakes. And we're an organization that really does believe in rehabilitation and providing the resources to assist the youth in fulfilling what those dreams are instead of being deemed at a young age as a criminal, which really has serious implications for their future.

Hefner: Can you talk a little about the Delaware Youth Opportunities Initiative through the Delaware Center for Justice?

Biden: "Ready by 21" was recently passed, and that allows courts to extend jurisdiction up to age 21 for youth who are involved in the foster care system. So, as you and I know, 18 to 21 is a critical coming-of-age. This allows the youth to be assisted with rent and stipends and to be provided with that extra support that is often needed between the ages of 18 and 21. A large portion of youth in the foster care system are also involved in the juvenile justice system. So there's a large percentage of cross-over youth; I believe it is about half of the Division of Family Services youth that are also involved in the Division of Youth Rehabilitative Services.

Hefner: And, as I understand it, one of the goals of the initiative is to use research to drive policy decisions that will produce improved outcomes for young people transitioning from foster care to adulthood. How has research been used to create new policies or modify existing policies to improve the lives of these young people?

Biden: I think we really need to look at what's working and to really research what works. To increase evidence-based practices is essential in terms of meeting outcomes and producing positive outcomes for the

youth and for the programs. That's why there has been such a push to really implement evidence-based practices in all of DCJ's programs.

Hefner: In keeping with the theme of juvenile justice, can you talk some about your program, Young@Art, and how that is used to support youth?

Biden: Young@Art came about because I would go into the [juvenile detention] facilities when I worked for the state and the students [were] so creative and were creating these beautiful pieces of artwork. It was definitely a talent within the facility and a passion of a lot of the youth. Young@Art kind of came from that. The students create artwork while they're in the facilities, and then that artwork is taken out into the community and sold. Half of the proceeds from the sale go directly to the youth, and half go back into the program. The proceeds that go back into the program are used for buying art supplies for the facilities, as well as paying the youth minimum wage to work the community art shows.

We are still trying to implement [the program so] that it would be a student-run business – basically a social enterprise where the students themselves would be running the business and learning financial literacy skills that are needed. The program was off the ground when I was working with the state. We are now kind of in limbo. We're looking for a home. And the Delaware Center for Justice actually may take over the program. We're discussing that right now.

Hefner: Is there anything else about juvenile justice in the state of Delaware that you would like to mention before we move on?

Biden: The one big thing we're also working on is civil citations, which kind of resembles our existing School Offense Diversion Program. It basically diverts first-time youth offenders from formal arrest, those who have committed non-violent and low-level offenses. The idea here is that sanctions are used in place of arrest. So they would include youth and family counseling, drug screening, substance abuse treatment, a letter of apology and restitution. Right now DCJ is working with other advocates to identify providers, specifically non-profits, who are in the community to provide these diversion programs.

Hefner: What are the benefits to youth of diverting them from the traditional criminal justice system?

Biden: Well, they don't have a record, which, again, has implications for future jobs and educational opportunities. [This] provides them with services that are needed to address some of the behavioral issues that are going on, whether it be trauma, substance abuse, mental health issues, [or] issues within the family. So it helps the students and the families access the needed resources so that they can make positive changes.

Death Penalty Reform

Hefner: Another issue that has been in the media recently is the effort to abolish the death penalty, both in Delaware and nationwide. Why is the death penalty an important issue to focus on and to potentially reform in Delaware?

Biden: I think we know that the death penalty is not cost effective. Taxpayer dollars are not being spent well due to the number of appeals. Research has shown time and time again that the death penalty is not a deterrent. And in states where the death penalty exists, there are often the highest rates of capital cases. I think that it wastes resources that could go towards victim services and preventing future victims. The research shows us that offenders rarely are considering the consequences when committing crimes. And Delaware ranks fifth in death sentences.

Hefner: In 2013, the Delaware State Senate voted to repeal the death penalty, excluding current inmates who are on death row. But, this still has to go through the House [of Representatives]. What do you think the future of the death penalty system is in Delaware?

Biden: I hope that it changes. I hope that it's repealed. Delaware Center for Justice is a founding member of the Delaware Repeal Coalition, which consists of numerous community and faith-based organizations. I think the focus is on trying to put pressure now on democratic leadership to suspend the committee rules to bring it to the floor for a vote. It passed the Senate so I believe that it deserves a vote in the House. And, I think Delawareans would agree. There have been thousands of Delawareans who have signed a petition. So, I'm hopeful that the death penalty will be repealed in the coming years.

Future Directions

Hefner: What emerging social or political issues do you see coming out of the work of the Delaware Center for Justice?

Biden: Well right now we've been working on – and hope to continue working on providing community based, pre-trial supervision to low- to medium-risk offenders. Delaware [is a] Justice Reinvestment Initiative state [a task force comprehensively evaluates the state's criminal justice system]. And we have a high pre-trial detention population. And so there has been a lot of work done to provide community based pre-trial supervision of defendants. And so, that's an issue that we are working on. We hope in the near future to be one of those community providers. We are also planning to provide intensive case management at the Achievement Center.

The Achievement Center is basically a one-stop for moderate- to high-risk offenders. We're taking a collaborative, multidisciplinary approach [to] providing a continuum of evidence-based services. There will be highly qualified co-located partners - substance abuse providers, mental health providers. And then Delaware Center for Justice plans on providing intensive case management. So it's basically where you can get a variety of services under one roof. There will also be employment services, job training, and a multitude of other services. Because re-entry is really our niche...we are really dedicated to focusing on helping those who are coming out of prison to reintegrate successfully into society.

Hefner: Can you talk a little bit more about the issues with re-entry and the challenges that people do face when they are trying to reintegrate into society, from prison or other correctional facility?

Biden: People who are coming out of prison have a record and, so, finding gainful employment [is difficult]. There's a need for accessing educational opportunities...housing, transportation, mental health and substance abuse [services]. We need take a holistic approach of helping those who have been incarcerated reintegrate back into society. We're supposed to be a society that believes in second chances. You commit a crime and you pay your time, but then are not given the opportunities to really rebuild your life. And so if you can't find a job, you can't find housing, you don't have the education that is needed for these jobs...it's often difficult to be successful.

Hefner: Are there any policies in Delaware relating specifically to re-entry issues?

Biden: We're actually working on [a bill] called - which has just passed in Wilmington – “Ban the Box.” It was introduced in June 2013. And it's currently before the Economic Development/Banking Insurance and Commerce Committee in the House. Basically, it would prohibit a public employer from inquiring into or considering the criminal record history or credit history of the applicant before...a conditional offer [for employment] is made. The bill specifies that background checks can only consider felonies from within the past 10 years and misdemeanors from within the past five years. And, so, the reason why DCJ is supporting this policy is that this will remove barriers for individuals who are re-entering communities. You know, the

ability to secure a job is crucial. And, so, when you go in to fill out an application and it asks for your criminal history upfront an employer can automatically look at that and disqualify you. And we're hoping that that no longer happens, that the applicant can get an interview and be able to explain their situation and explain...that they made a mistake, but this is what they've done to turn their life around. And so it [previous criminal record] doesn't automatically disqualify them for being a potential candidate.

Hefner: So are there any other issues you would like to discuss that you see as increasingly important to the state of Delaware that we haven't already talked about?

Biden: One of the things that we are doing is addressing gun violence, specifically [in] New Castle County and the city of Wilmington. We are going to be implementing a program called "SWAGG" – Student Warriors Against Guns and Gangs. There are three main components. There is an educational component, which is intensive. We are using an evidence-based curriculum that is endorsed by OJJDP [Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention]. We will be hiring an educational instructor to go into the facility and to teach that curriculum. And then the second component [consists of] community-based support groups. We are hoping, eventually, that these support groups could be peer-run. This is involving the community; this is where members of the community come in to speak with the students. The third component is linking those students to intensive case management – helping the students find employment, find training programs, enroll in education [programs].

To reduce the gun violence in the city of Wilmington, it's going to require all hands on deck. It is going to require effort from within the community, from non-profit agencies, [and] from state agencies to really provide those intensive wrap-around services. That is something that I'm really excited about. We just received funding from a private foundation for three years and the state also provided us with some funding.

Hefner: Can you talk specifically about the problem of gun violence in Wilmington, specifically?

Biden: We just had, I believe, six youth who were at the Department of Services for Children, Youth, and Their Families killed within the last year [from gun violence]. The majority of perpetrators are between the ages of 18 and I believe it's, 30, and the majority of the victims [as well]. This is kind of a real crisis. And we have to, as a community, look at why this is happening. I think a lot of it has to do with structural racism and inequality and living in poverty.

We don't talk about having a gang problem. But we do [have one], because as you know...the definition of gangs are four or more individuals organized around crime. And, so, you have geographic gangs like block gangs. We really need to provide that support and education of how gun violence not only affects victims and the individual, but the community at-large. And to be able to provide, you know, those, those resources that are needed, whether that be, again, mental health, substance abuse, education, employment, and increasing the self-worth of these youth, helping them to see that this doesn't have to be their life.

Hefner: I have one more question for you. You have grown up in a family of political influence and you've talked about your father and the influence his work has had on some of your personal and professional interests. Do you have any interest in running for political office in the future?

Biden: No, absolutely not. I have seen the value of public service. And I choose to be an advocate for youth and this is kind of my [passion]. I don't ever see myself running for political office. I have a lot of respect for a lot of politicians out there. And I've seen with my own eyes what good can be [done by] people who go into public service, the changes they can make. In my eyes, it's a noble profession. I know that politicians always get a bad rap. But I really see it as a noble profession. And I think it can be done with honesty and integrity, and passion. But myself? No. I mean, I think when you grow up in a political family, you have very little privacy. I'm sensitive. I am a sensitive woman. Not that I'm not tough, because I am. [Chuckles] But, you know, I think that politics is not for me. I'll stick to the non-profit, social work arena.

Final Remarks

In closing the interview, Biden shared two thoughts that have guided her professional interest and passion for helping others:

Biden: My two favorite quotes are: “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has,” by Margaret Mead. And another one that I love is by Maggie Kuhn who said, “Speak your mind even if your voice shakes.”