

Area lawyer marks 1,000th foster child adoption case

BY DONALD BRADLEY
The Kansas City Star

The judge paused as she looked out over a hushed, crowded courtroom.

Then came words rarely heard, if ever, in a division that hears a lot of talk about abused and neglected children.

“I order everyone here to give a standing ovation to Mr. Balloun,” Johnson County District Judge Kathleen Sloan said in the same tone she would use to send someone to jail.

And as if they’d heard “All rise,” people stood and clapped.

The judge smiled. Moments earlier, she had dried her eyes.

So who is J. Eugene Balloun and what makes him so special?

Well, let’s see — after growing up in a house crowded with displaced cousins during the 1930s, he helped pay for college with three Holsteins. Now he’s got a 15th-floor corner office with a spectacular view of downtown as a partner in one of Kansas City’s most prominent law firms.

But Monday’s court hearing wasn’t about any of that.

Balloun, 85, was there to complete his 1,000th adoption of children in foster care. He hasn’t pocketed a dime for any of them. Instead, he and his firm, Shook, Hardy & Bacon, put those state fees in a scholarship fund to help send those kids to college someday.

So far, the fund has provided \$625,000 to nearly 500 students.

Correction: The hearing in Division 10 was billed as Balloun’s 1,000th adoption — that’s wrong, sort of. The case involved two children. So that’s 1,001 children taken from parents for often heartbreaking reasons and given new homes and new starts. And love.

Lori Ross, chief executive officer of the Midwest Foster Care and Adoption Association, said of Balloun: “He is an amazing, energetic and passionate man who basically gave the second part of his



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Gene Balloun got a hug Monday from former colleague Melissa Taylor Standridge, a judge on the Kansas Court of Appeals.

life to helping kids who had been abused and neglected.

“He has changed the world.”

Sloan began Monday’s court hearing by telling Balloun: “It is an honor for me to be sitting here today.”

At one point, Balloun, who specializes in commercial litigation, asked Sloan for permission to turn his back and address the gallery.

She granted the request with a smile, and Balloun spoke of the children in his life — the ones in the adoptions and the ones in his home. He thanked judges, clerks, other attorneys, his firm, social workers and his legal assistant for helping him help them.

Mainly, he thanked his wife, Sheila Womble, for doing most of the work for the 29 foster children they took in over the years.

Hannah, 16, the last of those 29 and one of two the couple adopted, sat in a corner of the courtroom, at one point holding a hand over her mouth.

“They have brought joy and meaning to our lives,” Balloun said, his voice breaking.

“Thanks, guys.”

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Just inside the door to Balloun’s office high in the Shook, Hardy & Bacon office tower south of Crown Center is a plaque that says something about how much money he brought to the firm in a recent year. Lots of zeros.

The plaque sits on the floor, leaning against the wall beneath where he hangs his coat.

He would much rather talk about the thousand kids who each required 10 or so hours of work and whose cases didn’t bring in a dime.

Photos of those children cover the cubicle walls of longtime assistant Kathy Hoffman, whom Balloun credits with doing much of the legwork on the adoptions. On a recent day, the two of them looked at the pictures and remembered the stories.



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Attorney Gene Balloun spoke with Lexie Hicks on Monday in a Johnson County courtroom after she adopted Will and McKenna, the 1,000th and 1,001st adoptions Balloun has handled pro bono. He and his firm, Shook, Hardy & Bacon, donate the state fee to a fund he and his wife started to send those children to college.

Like the woman who decided at the last minute that she was 1/32nd Native American, nearly sending the case into Oklahoma tribal court. That one, Hoffman said, took more than 10 hours.

The pictures? Row after row of happy faces of beautiful children.

"This tells you why we do it," Hoffman said.

She describes Balloun as a friendly, humble man who drives a 2011 Volkswagen Jetta and might keep a jacket 30 years. In all their time together, she's heard him curse once. That was a "hell" for which he apologized.

Photos of Balloun's own children line a shelf in his office.

"How many lawyers my age have a 16-year-old daughter who looks like this?" he asked, lifting up a photo of Hannah, a sophomore at Shawnee Mission West.

He smiled a daddy's smile: "She plays the violin."

Past the photo, the bright window framed a view of Kansas to the west. He asked for that. Kansas, way out there, is home.

His grandparents came from eastern Europe as a young married couple and

started life in America dirt poor. His father attended a business college and landed a job as a bookkeeper for a small oil company in Russell.

He insisted that his five children get an education. Four cousins came to live with them during the Great Depression because their father could not find work. That made nine children in the house on the edge of town with several acres of land. The children milked cows, raised hogs and worked gardens.

Balloun had a paper route. He drove a tractor and worked at a flour mill.

In high school he learned he had a knack for debate, taking on classmate Arlen Specter, who went on to a long career as a U.S. senator from Pennsylvania.

The local Rotary Club gave Balloun a Holstein calf to raise and by the time he graduated his herd had grown to three, which he sold to help pay for college at the University of Kansas.

After law school and a stint in the Air Force, he returned home to Russell in 1954 and faced off a few times in court with a county attorney by the name of Bob Dole.

Balloun arrived at what is now Shook, Hardy & Bacon about 30 years ago. That's about the time he and Sheila decided to become foster parents.

She called one day while he was in federal court in Topeka.

"They want to know if we'll take a baby," she told him.

They had wanted to skip the baby stage, but they decided to go for it. By the time Balloun got home, his assistants had secured a baby bed and diapers.

The baby arrived Nov. 20, 1987, and Balloun took him to the doctor the next day.

"Are you new parents?" the doctor asked.

"Got him yesterday," Balloun told him.

"Well, you got the diaper on backwards," the doctor said.

That baby is now their 28-year-old son, David.

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Balloun and his wife joined a support group for foster parents, and that's how the whole adoption thing started. The others asked questions — he was a lawyer, after all.

He was soon handling their adoptions, but he declined the fee for handling cases of children in state custody. Balloun's wife suggested the scholarship fund.

So over the years, Shook Hardy has donated the fees. The fund is managed by the Greater Kansas City Community Foundation. Current balance: about \$200,000. Depending on the school, amounts to students typically range from \$750 to \$3,000 a year.

But Balloun didn't stop at adoptions. He challenged Missouri over foster care subsidies and Kansas over the educational rights of children of undocumented workers.

Nor did he stop there. In the mid-1990s, he and another lawyer, David Waxse, on a pro bono basis, represented students and parents in the Olathe School District in a challenge to the school board's decision to ban "Annie on My Mind," a book about two teenage girls who fall in love.

During questioning by Balloun in federal court, a school board member testified that he believed homosexuality is wrong.

"I believe in what the Bible says about homosexuality," the man said. "It is a sin."

The plaintiffs won. The judge awarded Balloun and Waxse, now a federal judge, \$170,000 in legal fees. Balloun remained a

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JOHNSON COUNTY DISTRICT JUDGE KATHLEEN SLOAN

friend of the book's author, Nancy Garden, until she died last summer.

But it is the adoptions of children in foster care that Balloun will be known for. Matthew Keenan, who heads up Shook, Hardy & Bacon's pro bono program, said the effort's focus is to help children.

"And Gene's work is the centerpiece of that."



Lexie Hicks was losing hope.

The 31-year-old Shawnee woman had been caring for two children, a boy, 12, and a girl, 10, as a foster parent. She wanted to adopt both, but she kept running into a wall. Then she heard about Gene Balloun and left a message for him to call.

"He called me back that evening, on his cellphone," she remembered. "He told me what he could do. I knew then I wanted him to be my lawyer."

Monday's adoption hearing in Olathe was for Hicks and those kids, Will and McKenna.

"You came in here happy today and I get to have you leave even happier," Sloan told the three from the bench. "A judge doesn't get to do that often."

Most people in the courtroom were friends, former colleagues and family of Balloun. His sister, Betty Boxberger, came from Russell. She remembered that first Holstein calf. She knows how far Balloun has come.

"We're all real proud of him," she said.

Except for cookies on a table, it was a regular day in court. A witness was sworn, testimony heard, petitions granted and the lives of two children changed forever.

Melissa Taylor Standridge, a judge on the Kansas Court of Appeals, sat in the gallery with a tissue ready. She met Balloun in 1992 when she started at Shook, Hardy & Bacon. Because of him, she became a foster parent and adopted four children.

"He is my idol," she said. "Look at all he's done to repair the world."

Balloun's wife, Sheila, took it all in. This part is what keeps her husband going.

"I would like to think it was me, but I suspect it is his love of the law," she said.

Balloun says he'll keep at it until he gets Hannah, his youngest, through college.

"Then I'll think about going part time."

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