

THE *Stuart Dunnings III* PROSECUTION PRACTICE

Serving the public as Ingham County prosecutor is the most rewarding practice I could imagine. Approximately 12,000 cases a year come through our office, and while some of these may seem routine to a court veteran, none are routine to those whose lives are affected by our work.

Two cases from my first year in office had a particular effect on me and resulted in significant changes in our approach to school truancy and domestic violence.

Nancy Walker was a 13-year-old girl from Lansing who died of a drug overdose after she was given cocaine and was molested by a 21-year-old adult. After a review of the circumstances of her all-too-brief life, it was discovered that she had been absent from school and had fallen into a life of drugs and petty crime, her only adult supervision coming from the dopers and low lifes she had fallen in with.

As a first-term prosecutor, I was startled by the extent of the truancy problem in our local schools. Thirty-one percent of Lansing students were categorized as chronic truants. While truancy cases may seem a minor misdemeanor offense, I soon found that the major felony crimes in my jurisdiction were often committed by those who had failed to attend school.

School attendance is a critical stabilizing force in a child's life. Particularly for students dealing with dysfunctional home environments, school may be the only predictable element in their lives. Not only are children who skip school missing out on this critical element in their socialization, they also often drift through low-paying jobs, when they are working at all. This mix of poor social skills, inconsistent and low-paid work, and youth, is the most likely predictor of major crimes.

In 1997, our office started a truancy enforcement program, which began with our elementary schools. We have brought criminal charges against parents for failing to get their elementary-age children to school. Additionally, we have worked with the Ingham County Circuit and Probate Courts and the Lansing School District to provide court intervention to older students through the Truancy Court program.

It is not the goal of this enforcement effort to throw parents into the county jail, nor young persons into our juvenile home. Rather, we are using the power of court intervention to effect a positive change in the lives of young persons and their parents. Parenting classes, offered by Child Abuse Prevention Services, provide needed information to parents and allow for structured family time. Our LEAD (Lansing Elementary Attendance Diversion) program has improved the attendance of over 90 percent of its participants.

Nancy Muriel was a long-time victim of domestic violence. Seven times her attacker was arrested and brought before the court

on charges. Seven times Ms. Muriel refused to testify against him, and seven times he was let back out onto the streets. Her assailant/"boyfriend," Eldrick Price, had a history of domestic violence that predated both my term as prosecutor and his relationship with Ms. Muriel. His eighth charge of domestic violence was a homicide.

After the Nancy Muriel homicide, our office changed its long-standing procedures relating to domestic violence prosecutions. Victims who wish to drop charges against their attackers now must come in for a face-to-face meeting with me and explain why they believe their attacker should go free. In most cases, the answer is no. However, I believe it is important to hear from the victims on these cases, while keeping in mind the tragic example of Nancy Muriel.

A typical day at the Ingham County Prosecutor's Office includes time spent on matters involving drug addiction, domestic violence, child abuse, sexual assault, and murder. Despite this, I love this job more than any other and have twice asked the voters to return me to my work. I believe my practice has made Ingham County a safer place to live, work, and raise a family. No one will ever lead the evening news with a story of a crime that didn't happen, any more than they would tell a tale of a plane that didn't crash. However, I believe a prosecutor's most important and rewarding work lies in crime prevention, so that the Nancy Muriels and Nancy Walkers of the world have a chance to survive.

I encourage my colleagues to spend a year or two in public service law at some point in their careers. It need not be spent in a prosecutor's office. In Michigan, our most prominent career public servant attorney is the governor, but thousands of others are working for the United States, the state of Michigan and local governments, Legal Aid, and various other avenues of public service. My nine years in public service have been the most rewarding I can imagine, and I am grateful that the public has allowed me to serve. ◆



Stuart Dunning III has served as Ingham County prosecutor since 1997. He is past president of the Prosecuting Attorneys Association of Michigan, having led Michigan's 83 prosecutors in 2004–2005. Before his election, Mr. Dunning was a partner in the firm of Dunning & Frawley, P.C. (now the Dunning Law Firm), the first black-owned law firm in Lansing history. Mr. Dunning and his wife, Cynthia, live in Lansing and have three daughters.