

Susan Christofferson
A one-woman peace-keeping force for families in crisis

The potent phrase, "I support family values," makes for good political speech. It acts like a punctuation mark and can be placed strategically among the everyday words of nearly every politician walking the earth. Who isn't for "family values"?

Sadly, when it comes to family values, the multitudinous mouths spouting the words are divided into a pair of very different camps. There is the photo-op-seeking, baby-kissing, budget-cutting camp. And then there are people like Susan Christofferson.

Christofferson is the executive director of The Nurturing Center in Kalispell, which this year celebrates 25 years of improving child care and strengthening families. A quarter-century ago, Christofferson arrived in town as a volunteer, working the phones trying to help families secure quality day care so they could go out and earn a paycheck. With her head cocked to hold the receiver, Christofferson shuffled with both hands through a desk covered in paperwork. She answered questions about what to look for in a day care center, made referrals and pointed the way to financial assistance.

But this wasn't enough. The parents on the other end of the line needed more.

"I'd be on the phone with these people, trying to link them up with child care, and they were asking me all these questions about parenting," remembers Christofferson. Her organization decided to begin offering parenting classes, and "it just bloomed from there."

Today, The Nurturing Center sits in the quiet shade of Third Avenue West, just a few blocks from downtown Kalispell. A welcoming front porch greets moms, dads and kids in search of everything from cash assistance with child care to books about parenting to classes in anger management and child abuse prevention.

Every year, more than 300 different classes are offered through The Nurturing Center. Like everything the Center does, these learning experiences are designed to reinforce the seams that hold families together.

When those seams tear, Christofferson and her staff are there looking for ways to re-bind men, women and children. This isn't easy work, as Christofferson explains: "There are all these [stresses] that erode what parents have to give their children."

Sometimes the crisis of the moment is a lost job or some other financial hardship. Sometimes the trouble digs deeper, sending family members to the hospital and into the court system.

Wherever families wind up, Christofferson is there. The Nurturing Center provides space for supervised visitation between parents and children separated by court order. These visits can make for tense moments, when Christofferson's uncanny ability to keep her composure comes in handy.

Supervised visitations bring together a volatile mix of players; fathers out on bail for abusing their spouses, mothers just out of drug rehab and children whose fragile minds can't decide whether they should be happy or terrified to see an offending parent.

In the middle of this emotional storm sits Christofferson, who must take her experience super-

vising visitations into the courtroom. The 53-year-old mother of three—including a 16-year-old foster daughter—is routinely called to the stand. There, Christofferson is asked for her opinions about the mothers and fathers whose visits she has supervised.

Some of the visits are easy to recall. These are the ones that make Christofferson feel like a one-woman UN peace-keeping force. She's been threatened, cussed at, and once had a toy gun pulled on her in a very unplayful way. Then there was the time police stormed The Nurturing Center and arrested a wanted parent.

When Christofferson says, "I'm putting myself at risk," her sentiment applies to more than just police raids and threats from upset parents. She's talking about her fear of taking the stand in court and making judgment calls about whether or not a person is fit to parent. She's remembering the secret signals she gives children before supervised visitations. If a child gives her the sign—or if she notices any other clue that a parent is being manipulative or unkind—then Christofferson intervenes.

No matter what Christofferson does, she's bound to disappoint somebody. She says The Nurturing Center tries to treat everyone with dignity—even parents accused of horrid abuse. Christofferson maintains a judicious demeanor—she manages interactions between the abused and the abuser with a compassionate yet straight face. And this sometimes upsets the victims in the room—the people who can't see that Christofferson can't play it any other way.

"They have real issues with me not being mad at [the abusers] too," says Christofferson, who is given to saying, "we don't fight child abuse, we strengthen families."

Here's another hazard of Christofferson's workplace: The risk of coming across as permissive to those who might ask, "What do you mean you don't fight child abuse?"

Remember, it's all about the nurturing—about maintaining contact with families instead of alienating them. This allows The Nurturing Center to step in before families fall apart. One of the Center's programs targets "the average parent who's about to lose it and slap their kid," says Christofferson. "They don't have anybody to call."

They do now, as The Nurturing Center's House Calls program acts like a 911 for moms and dads who've reached their limit. The call comes in, and the Center's Barry Flannigan goes out.

When asked about his boss, Flannigan says her work is "so stressful." But Christofferson is able to roll with it. She moves seamlessly from her high-profile role as the Center's spokesperson and administrator to carefree moments crawling around on the floor with toddlers.

Christofferson would no doubt like more of these moments, but there's always a crisis at hand that she must tune into.

"She's got the antenna up," says Flannigan, who's watched Christofferson stand her ground amid the constant crossfire brought to the Center by families in crisis. "That's not something that intimidates her. You're not going to bulldoze Susan."

Just ask the countless Montana legislators who've found themselves face-to-face with Christofferson in the halls of the Statehouse.

"I haven't missed a single legislative session yet," says Christofferson, whose organization receives 60 percent of its funding from the Department of Public Health and Human Services (other funds come from private donors, the United Way, Flathead County and the USDA).

Of the many challenges Christofferson faces, this is among the most difficult: Convincing politicians to back up their rhetoric about family values



Photo by Chad Harder

with real dollars. "This is how you save tax dollars—by investing up front" in child care and support for families, says Christofferson. Like so many other activists, she shakes her head over so many lawmakers missing this key point. If you spend more today on innocent kids, you'll spend less tomorrow on guilty adults locked up behind bars.

"That is a mysterious, nebulous issue for some politicians," says Christofferson, adding, "You know, children cannot speak for themselves. All these other interest groups can speak for themselves, so it falls on us."

David Madison