



2021 Virtual Conference

THE 28TH ANNUAL
**Children's
Law Institute**

Rising to the Challenge: Revolutionizing Practice

January 13-15th, 2021

EXCELLENCE AWARD WINNERS

Bryce Pittenger is a licensed professional clinical counselor and the CEO of the Behavioral Health Collaborative for the State of New Mexico. Bryce began her career in mental health in 1996, working with an Albuquerque based community mental health agency. She worked in outpatient, treatment foster care, and residential treatment. She was in private practice for 8 years working with survivors of sexual abuse, offenders, and families as well as contracts with Albuquerque Public Schools serving youth at three alternative schools. In 2009 she became clinical supervisor of a Residential Treatment Center for adolescents with sex offending behavior at Hogares in Albuquerque. In 2010 she became clinical director at Hogares over the Core Service Agency project overseeing Comprehensive Community Supports, Behavioral Management Services, Respite, Suboxone Clinic, and outpatient therapies. In 2014 she moved to the State and became clinical supervisor for CYFD's Juvenile Justice Services. In 2015 she became Deputy Director of Behavioral Health for Juvenile Justice Services, overseeing clinicians throughout the state. In 2016 she became Director of Behavioral Health at CYFD, overseeing programs, grants, services, finances, and data. In October of 2020 she became full time CEO of the Behavioral Health Collaborative with HSD, serving all member agencies and local communities. Ms. Pittenger believes in the power of collaboration to create a trauma responsive system of care for all New Mexicans who need mental health supports or services

BRYCE PITTENGER

BEHAVIORAL HEALTH PROFESSIONAL AWARD



“Bryce is the embodiment of holding the values of family-driven, youth centered, community-based care.”



BECKY SCHRITTER

CASA VOLUNTEER AWARD

“It is easy to give up when you have been a CASA Volunteer for nine years, but Becky does not. She volunteers to advocate for teens and is not afraid to be honest with them.”

Kelly O'Neill, JD, is a certified Child Welfare Law Specialist and the supervising appellate attorney for CYFD. She has been a children's court attorney for CYFD since 2010, having worked in the Department's Bernalillo County office before moving to the appellate unit in 2014. Ms. O'Neill earned her bachelor's degree and juris doctor from the University of Tulsa. She worked as a media relations director in college athletics at several Division I universities between undergraduate school and law school.

KELLY O'NEILL

CHILDREN'S COURT ATTORNEY IN CHILD WELFARE AWARD



“Kelly maintains the highest level of professional ethics. Kelly works collaboratively with all internal staff and external stakeholders always trying to move child welfare practice forward.”



DAVID BRAINERD
CHILDREN'S COURT ATTORNEY IN CHILD WELFARE
AWARD

“Mr. Brainerd was very knowledgeable of the Children's code, demonstrated compassion and empathy for the Respondent parents, and exercised professionalism toward his colleagues and the Court.”

My husband and I have been fostering for about 4 years. I have worked in Human Resources for 15 years and now continuing my education in Early Childhood Education. I grew up in an Air Force family and I have traveled all around the world. I've always known I wanted to foster/adopt. In my free time I like to travel, cook and play bingo.

JULIE MONTANO

CYFD FOSTER PARENT AWARD



“Julie is also very dedicated to knowing every bit of information so that she can best help the children that come into her home. She takes an active role informing herself on the children's needs and works actively to get these needs met.”

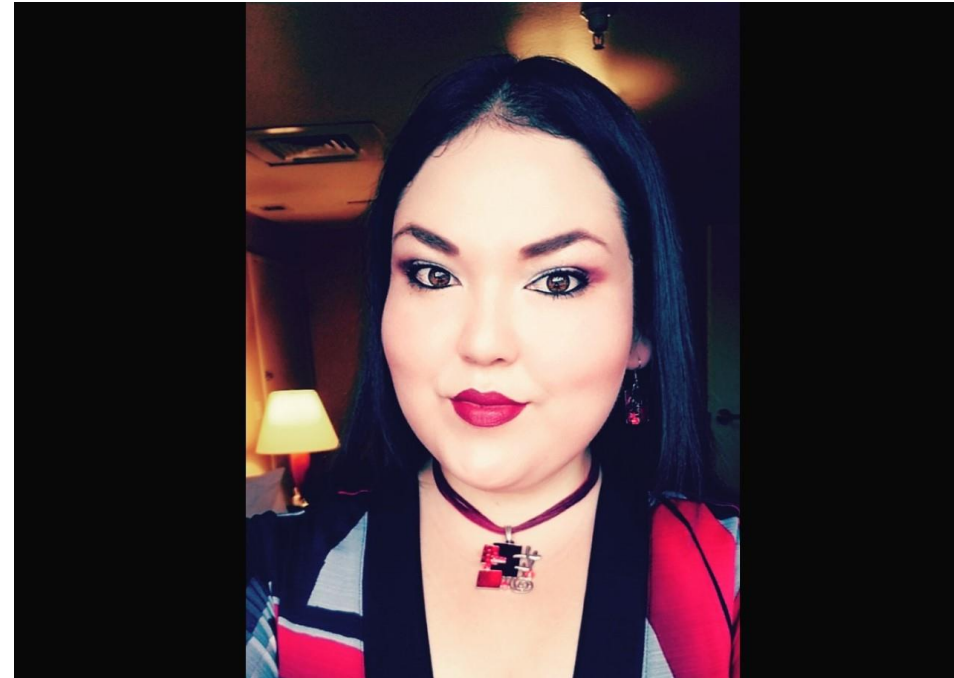
Jamie L. Martinez has spent her career working with the Children, Youth and Families Department trying to make a difference in her community. Jamie has spent 13 years in different capacities to include Child Protective Services, Behavioral Health Services and most recently, with the Juvenile Justice Services. Jamie graduated with a Bachelor's Degree in Psychology with a minor in Southwest Studies in 2007. Jamie continued her education and enrolled in the Social Work Graduate Program at Highlands University, where she earned a master's degree in 2012. Shortly after, Jamie obtained the title of a Licensed Master Social Worker.

Jamie's passion remains serving youth within her community and she has learned a lot from the families she has served. Jamie strives to make lasting relationships with her clients. She works closely with Core Service Agencies and Community Providers to help build relationships and networking opportunities. Her goal is to help link families to community services that will help them develop life skills, while overcoming various obstacles in their lives.

Outside of work, Jamie enjoys spending time with her rambunctious 6-year-old as she has taught her, in so many ways, the importance of living in the moment. Jamie attributes her drive and dedication to the team she is surrounded by and the support she has received throughout her time with JJS.

JAMIE MARTINEZ

CYFD JUVENILE JUSTICE STAFF AWARD



“Jamie is very strengths-based, fair and always makes sure to point out the positive. Showing her support allows clients and families to be comfortable in reaching out to her.”

My name is Miquela Otero, I was born and raised in Tukumcari, NM. I have been married to my wonderful husband Gino for 19 years! We have been blessed with 3 beautiful GEMs; our daughters Gracie, Emily and Melanie. I have worked with CYFD for the last 15 years, starting out as a temporary employee for 6 months, CSA for 6 years and Office Administrator since 2011! I am currently the Pull Together School Liaison and I have been the PTO President for our Elementary school here in Tukumcari for the last 8 years! I love to be involved in planning and organizing events and love to help people in need. I am honored to be nominated for the Excellence award and thankful for each and every day that I get to make a difference in a child's life!

MIQUELA OTERO

CYFD SUPPORT STAFF AWARD



“Miquela is dedicated to her position, the department, and its ultimate goals of helping families. She is a true believer, and works towards improving families' lives, in whatever form that takes.”

Sonia Ramirez-Tapia, a California native and daughter of immigrant parents, is first-generation college graduate within her immediate and extended family. Sonia left her home state in pursuit of a higher education at New Mexico Highlands University and is now a Licensed Master of Social Work with a focus in Clinical Social Work Practice. She immediately began working with The Children, Youth and Families Department in Las Vegas, NM as an In-Home Services Practitioner. In the three and a half years working with CYFD, Sonia has occasionally carried a diverse case load which includes Spanish speaking families, In-Home Services, Permanency Planning and Investigations. In addition to her work, Sonia enjoys long drives to California to visit her parents and plays basketball during her leisure time.

SONIA RAMIREZ-TAPIA

CYFD PROTECTIVE SERVICES STAFF AWARD



“Sonia has advocated for clients’ rights, for support, for services, for reunification and for what our department stands for, ensuring the quality of life for our children. Sonia has been the voice for her clients that have felt they have no voice.”



SELENA MORENO

FOSTER YOUTH ALUMNUS AWARD

“Selena has made a difference in the lives of people impacted by systems by speaking up and sharing her own experiences. This raises awareness of the obstacles and barriers young people have to navigate and maneuver.”



ELIJAH DAVIS

FOSTER YOUTH ALUMNUS AWARD

“Over the past nine months of virtual programming at NMCAN (due to the pandemic), Elijah has been a regular presence helping to build community among his peers during a time of so much disconnection.

It takes a lot of energy and effort to show up in virtual spaces, especially while simultaneously parenting, and Elijah's commitment to stay connected has been noticeable.”

Alexis M. DeLaCruz, J.D., is a staff attorney in the Farmington office of the Native American Disability Law Center. Her practice focuses on the education civil rights of Native American children with disabilities. Ms. DeLaCruz has represented children with disabilities, and their families, in special education proceedings in Arizona and New Mexico and in schools funded by the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE). As a Guardian ad Litem and Youth Attorney, she also represents Native American children entitled to ICWA protection in the Eleventh Judicial District. Currently, Ms. DeLaCruz is the Law Center's lead counsel in the landmark federal case *Stephen C., et al., vs. Bureau of Indian Education, et.al.*, a historic civil rights case advancing the educational rights of Havasupai children. Ms. DeLaCruz graduated cum laude from Seattle University School of Law.

ALEXIS DELACRUZ

GAL/YOUTH/RESPONDENT ATTORNEY AWARD



“The level of commitment that Ms. DeLaCruz demonstrates towards her clients is astounding. Not only is she a consummate professional, she truly gets to the heart of each case and makes a genuine effort to get to know each child.”

My name is Bruce Battle and my current employment role is Community Support Worker. Before becoming a CSW in 2013 I served as Director of Juvenile Community Corrections. I'm currently employed through All Faiths Children's Advocacy Center. My goal is to share my life experiences through multiple books that I plan on writing. My most impressive achievements come from the birth of my three children.

BRUCE BATTLE

NON-PROFIT SERVICE PROVIDER AWARD



“There are so many more examples of how — AFTER RETIREMENT — Bruce has made a difference in the lives of the struggling youth. This gentle giant of a man is truly an asset to our community and his work undoubtedly has changed young lives for the better – and while doing so, he touched the hearts of his clients and his colleagues.”

Chief Judge Emilio J. Chavez was born and raised in Albuquerque, NM. He graduated from Grinnell College with B.A. in economics in 2001. He was inducted into the Grinnell College Athletic Hall of Fame in 2014. Following his undergraduate studies, he attended the University Of New Mexico School Of Law and served as a member of the law review prior to graduation in May of 2004. Initially, Judge Chavez began practicing law in Washington D.C. for a small energy law firm. Missing New Mexico, he took employment in Taos at the Eighth Judicial District Attorney's Office believing he would only be in Taos for a few years while he became a proficient skier.

In the intervening fifteen years, Judge Chavez is still in Taos. During that time he served as a Deputy District Attorney for ten years in the Eighth Judicial District and was awarded prosecutor of the year on several occasions. He has served as a regional director for the young lawyers division, and served three terms on Criminal Uniform Jury Instructions Committee. Additionally, Judge Chavez has spent time teaching microeconomics and macroeconomics as an adjunct professor for UNM-Taos.

Chief Judge Chavez was appointed to the bench in July of 2015. Upon his appointment, he began presiding over the Raton Adult and Juvenile Drug Courts and currently presides over the Taos Drug Court. Judge Chavez presides over a general jurisdiction docket and quickly saw the importance of his abuse and neglect docket. From 2015 - 2018, he presided over all of the abuse and neglect cases in Colfax and Union County. In 2019, he took over and presides over the majority of all abuse and neglect cases in Taos County. Additionally, he began serving as the chief judge in Eighth Judicial District in October of 2019.

Chief Judge Chavez hopes in the next few years that he can bring additional specialty courts to the district in an effort to provide additional support for families, people struggling with mental health and diverting other litigants outside of the criminal justice system. As it relates to abuse and neglect, Judge Chavez believes that having a specialty court for families will provide a more substantial opportunity to connect and assist respondents in their struggles in working a treatment plan.

EMILIO CHAVEZ

STATE OR TRIBAL JUDGE AWARD



“I don't think I've ever practiced before a judge who loved the law more than Judge Chavez. He is keenly analytical and can master tangled legal arguments and theories quickly and accurately.”

Queva Hubbard, is a Certified Peer Support Specialist for the state of New Mexico. She currently works as the Lead Parent Mentor Coordinator for the New Mexico Family Advocacy Program in the 13th and 2nd district courts. This organization focuses on working with parents whose children have been placed in foster care. In her role Queva works with an interdisciplinary legal team including an attorney and a licensed social worker. One of Queva's primary roles in her job is to help the parents who face seemingly unsurmountable odds against them navigate the system to arrive at the best possible outcome for the family unit. She has previously held positions as a Peer Mentor at the Pavilions in Los Lunas NM, which is a therapeutic community for women coming out of incarceration. Queva was also a Case Manager at Crossroads for Women in Albuquerque. Crossroads is an organization that focuses on helping homeless and former incarcerated women obtain skills and resources necessary to achieve self-sufficiency. Queva uses her experience with incarceration, treatment centers, addiction, and separation of child to help others make positive changes in their lives. She encourages growth, helps create stability, and provides assurance and hope in her community. Queva has advocated on multiple inequality panels such as: social change, mass incarceration, criminal justice reform, social injustice, and interdisciplinary representation. Queva is currently the Vice President on the board for Crossroads for Women. She also currently attends college at Central New Mexico Community College majoring in Human Services. Upon graduation she plans to pursue a degree in social work. Queva's motto is where there is support there is less trauma.

QUEVA HUBBARD

PARENT AWARD



Queva Hubbard is a Certified Peer Specialist and the Parent Mentor Coordinator for the New Mexico Family Advocacy Program. Queva uses her own experience, combined with specialized training as a peer specialist and a dedication to expanding her knowledge of the child welfare system to provide invaluable support to other system-involved parents. She also serves on the Family Representation Commission.

Education & Employment

Kasandra A. Gandara was born in Silver City, New Mexico where she began her social work career after receiving her bachelor's degree in Social Work from New Mexico State University (NSMU) in 1989. She has spent the last 30 years living and working in the Las Cruces community with both the State of New Mexico's Department of Health and its Children, Youth, and Families Department (CYFD).

During her service with CYFD, Kasandra returned to NMSU for her graduate degree in Social Work that she received in 2013. Kasandra is now retired from the State of New Mexico. In her 27 plus years serving the State of New Mexico, she has served in many social work roles including: Agency Administrator, Case Worker, Community Leader, Medical Case Manager, Program Specialist and Social Work Supervisor and Manager.

City Council

Kasandra was elected as councilor for City Council District 1 in November 2015. She is the founder of the Suicide Prevention Task Force for the City and Resilience Leaders, a collective impact model dedicated to combating ACEs and ensuring 100% of Dona Ana County residents have the survival and thriving services to flourish! She is currently the Mayor Pro Tempore for the City of Las Cruces.

Personal Life

She is a mother to two children - her son Bryan, an Armed Services Veteran, and her daughter Elena, a medical doctor completing her residency at the University of Colorado.

KASANDRA GANDARA

PUBLIC SERVANT AWARD



“Kasandra has used her platform to reform many community systems, heading up the Dona Ana Resilience Leaders. She continues to lead the way in macro solutions to the trauma crisis facing our communities.”