

# Child advocacy centers arose from Cramer's concern

Standing in front of the colorful four-building campus of the National Children's Advocacy Center at the corner of Pratt Avenue and Meridian Streets in downtown Huntsville, it is easy to point to it as just another of the many positive contributions made by U.S. Rep. Bud Cramer to the economic growth of Madison County and to his hometown.

But great accomplishments are rarely overnight successes, and what is often forgotten are the humble beginnings.

"There is a side of Bud Cramer that has been lost to the public since he was elected to Congress in 1991," says life-long friend Mike Gillespie, chairman of the Madison County Commission. "It goes back to the 1980s while Bud was still district attorney, trying child abuse and child sexual molestation cases day after day. He saw a common thread with all victimized children. The current system had no coordinated efforts of investigation that were sensitive to the child. As a result, he was bothered by the recurring incidents and the emotional distress and fear in victimized children."

According to Gillespie, Cramer talked to him about an innovative idea that involved pulling together a trained multidisciplinary team that was sensitive to an abused child's needs and that could work together under one roof. This unprece-

dent plan would include representatives from all agencies involved in a prosecutorial child abuse case: the court, law enforcement, child protection services, medical and forensic investigators, family counseling and victim advocacy.

"Prior to Bud Cramer's formulation of the NCAC, abused children were brought into the police station or a hospital and questioned by the police and doctors. The atmosphere was intimidating and frightening, and the child often encountered several strangers in the course of an investigation that were not conducive to a child's need for compassion," says Chris Newlin, executive director of the NCAC in Huntsville since 2005. Newlin himself began his career as a child advocate, working in a hospital environment. "Bud Cramer's idea for creating a child advocacy program was ingenious."

In 2003, the National Children's



Huntsville Times file

**Bud Cramer, right, takes a 2002 tour of the new National Children's Advocacy Center construction site with other officials.**

Advocacy Center opened its current facility, funded by capital investments totaling \$10 million. But back in 1984, Bud Cramer wasn't a congressman - he was just a man with an idea.

"It was very difficult in the beginning to implement an idea that had no precedent," says Gillespie. With only a little bit of money and a whole lot of support from the community, Cramer was able to locate the center in a house on Lincoln Street. The center opened its doors there in 1985.

"Watching the Children's Advocacy Center grow, from the little house on Lincoln Street to the campus it has presently, has been very impressive," says Mayor Loretta Spencer, who is a personal investor in the Center and who serves on the NCAC's Board of Directors. "This is a tremendous program which developed the model for other agencies. When they were ready to expand the little house facility,

the city became an immediate partner. We vacated a street and set aside a tract of land that was particularly important to Bud because it had direct access to I-565, which gives high visibility as people come to Huntsville for training. This positive program has allowed Huntsville to have nationwide visibility."

When Cramer got elected to Congress in 1991, Gillespie says, "he was able to empower people in a cause dear to his

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# Child

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heart. He blazed a path for children's advocacy that crossed party lines, and reached out first to the rest of the country and, today, to the world at large."

Cramer worked to secure a grant from the Department of Justice that appropriated funds for the growth of centers throughout the South, which now make up 43 percent of the centers in the U.S.

As the NCAC grew its purpose expanded, as well. The model introduced the training of professionals in all areas of child abuse and focused on quick response to child abuse allegations, while using leadership skills and education as a basis for prevention.

"The NCAC here in Huntsville is the model for more than 900 Children's Advocacy Centers worldwide, including countries like Croatia, Sweden and Israel," says Catherine Hereford, development director. "We have trained over 50,000 professionals in the prevention, intervention and professional services related to child sexual abuse, and have offered hope to over 250,000 victims since 1985, when Bud Cramer ran interference for children's rights."

Six hundred of the NCAC programs are located here in the United States, and they are known collectively as the

National Children's Alliance.

"Because of my extensive background working with abused children, I knew of Bud Cramer prior to coming to Huntsville - he was a sort of mythological character," Newlin says. "I remember well the Friday afternoon around 4:30 when I picked up the telephone and he introduced himself. We talked for over 40 minutes about my experience and goals but we also talked a lot about his vision for the NCAC. He is a true champion for children on Capital Hill."

Cramer's record in this respect is documented. In 1992, President George H.W. Bush signed Cramer's landmark National Children's Advocacy Program Act into law, providing expansion funds for children's advocacy programs in new communities.

According to Newlin, one in every seven boys and one in every four girls is abused, with 98 percent of those cases sexual in nature. Moreover, a child is 50 times more likely to be sexually abused than to be diagnosed with cancer.

"Our goal is, of course, to go out of business," he says. "But, as long as children are carrying the brunt of the problem, Huntsville has more than economic development and the space program to be proud of. Add to our innovative spirit the human element. We all owe Bud Cramer a debt of gratitude for his vision and hard work for the National Children's Advocacy Center."