

OIP executive director once fought for son's freedom

Posted Oct 8, 2015 at 11:46 AM

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Vicki Behenna is the new executive director of the Oklahoma Innocence Project at Oklahoma City University School of Law.

"It's almost like it's my responsibility to do this, having gone through what I did personally," Behenna said Wednesday. "I know what it's like for no one to listen."

After former U.S. Army 1st Lt. Michael Behenna was convicted of unpremeditated murder in a combat zone for killing an Iraqi, his parents fought five years for his freedom. He was paroled in 2014.

Vicki Behenna said she was interested in the work of the Innocence Project long before that and long before it came to Oklahoma in 2011.

"It's always been near and dear to my heart," she said.

Behenna, 56, of Edmond, is a director in the Oklahoma City office of Crowe & Dunlevy and will continue her practice with the firm part time while she works at the Oklahoma Innocence Project.

She was honored as Outstanding Assistant U.S. Attorney in 2012 and Distinguished (OCU) Law Alumna in 2013.

“Vicki has a reputation as a seeker of justice,” said OCU Law Dean Valerie Couch. “Her 25-plus years as a federal prosecutor, including her participation in the prosecution of Timothy McVeigh for the Oklahoma City bombing, is a tremendous resource for our project staff and clinical students.

“Vicki is tenacious and will fight for the truth on behalf of the clients in our project,” Couch said.

Heavy case load

The mission of the Oklahoma Innocence Project is to identify and rectify wrongful convictions across the state. Since the clinic opened in 2011, the staff has received 1,200 requests for help.

“In four years the clinic has done tremendous work,” Behenna said. “We’re at a critical point right now with two cases in litigation.”

Court hearings in those two cases are set for January. In addition, 15 cases are in progress and another 95 are awaiting assignment.

Staff members Christina Green and Joyce Mayer and the law students who help them with research, interviews and investigations “are very passionate about their cases,” Behenna said.

“It is remarkable the amount of work a skeleton staff has been able to accomplish on behalf of the wrongfully convicted in our state,” she said.

Behenna succeeds Lawrence Hellman, former OCU Law School dean, as executive director. Hellman returned to teaching full time this semester.

Human error

In the criminal justice system — like any system where humans are involved — you can count on mistakes being made, Behenna said, noting “It’s the mission of the Oklahoma Innocence Project to right those wrongs.”

That is difficult once a person has had his day in court, she said.

“It’s very hard for people who have been convicted to have a voice,” Behenna said. “The fact that it happens to one person is motivation enough to have this project and be a voice for those people.”