

December 29, 2002

1. Lawyer authors books on child support rights
<http://pjstar.com/news/topnews/g136381a.html>

Christine Ann Takata shares own experiences as a custodial parent

By TRACY BLAKE
of the Journal Star

PEORIA - Christine Ann Takata didn't start out with a desire to become an attorney, but divorce, debt and a desire to make things better for her two daughters led her on a path through law school and into the web of Illinois family law.

It's a path that inspired her to compile and write two books to help custodial parents in Illinois understand their rights and get the child support to which they're entitled.

"Child support is a huge problem in this country," Takata said, citing statistics that currently \$44 billion is owed in back child support in the United States. Illinois is among the worst with just an 11 percent enforcement rate, she added.

"I think that the book will at least help people know their rights."

"CATLAW Lite" is a child support enforcement book designed for Illinois custodial parents and includes enforcement pleadings and trial court forms. The title's first word is an acronym incorporating Takata's initials, plus "LAW," referring to Legal Access Web site or Legal Access Workbooks. It is designed for the custodial parent who has no formal legal experience and wants the basics for court. It is intended for those with or without legal representation.

"Whether they can afford a lawyer or not, they should know their rights. It's nice to know that when you ask a question, your lawyer is giving you the right answer," Takata said. "That gives you the confidence you need with your lawyer. That's one of the best things a client can do for their lawyer is to have trust in their lawyer, so their lawyer can do their job."

Takata, 41, has made it her job to understand Illinois family law because at one time it was personal. A year after her divorce in 1990, Takata's ex-husband stopped paying child support for their two children, then ages 2 and 4. She started working part time as a bartender because it was the only job that allowed her to be home during the day with her daughters. She also had to apply for state aid. It was through the state's collections department that Takata got her first introduction into family law practices.

"When you apply for welfare, the state automatically intervenes in your child support case," she said.

Takata was appointed an attorney to represent her in court. Takata's ex-husband told the court his only income was from a part-time job, but Takata knew he also was working for cash in construction. However, she said the state was so overburdened with cases that it didn't have the resources to verify his income so the Woodford County judge reduced his weekly support payments.

"What happened when we did go to court was instead of getting my child support enforced, they ended up getting my child support reduced," Takata said. The judge reduced her benefits from \$157 a week down to \$35 a week, which she says her ex-husband stopped paying altogether.

Takata said she tried to go back to court a year later but was refused because the state could not prove her ex-husband had other income.

"They suggested I learn to live without it," she said.

Out of frustration and a need to support her children on her own, Takata decided her only option was to continue her education.

"I didn't want to stay on welfare and continue my life raising my kids as a part-time bartender, so I went ahead and applied to Bradley," she said.

Before her marriage, Takata worked as a tool and die engineer. She needed two years of credits to complete a bachelor's degree. She attended Bradley University full time, majoring in psychology with a minor in political science. She completed her degree with honors in 1½ years.

"I was so focused. I knew what I wanted to do, and I was going to do it," she said. "When I finished my bachelor's degree, I started hunting around for jobs as an entry-level psychology graduate, and I couldn't find anything that paid over \$8 an hour. I started panicking."

Takata calculated that on her potential income, she was not going to be able to afford housing, transportation and household expenses once her student loan payments started.

After researching other career choices, Takata decided to apply for law school. She was accepted by two schools and decided to attend Northern Illinois University so she could be closer to her parents.

Takata graduated from law school in 1997 and thought she finally was going to be able to start her career.

"I was still looking for employment, but ironically the starting salary in

family law was closer to \$30,000, not \$40,000, which still wasn't enough to repay my student loans," she said.

Takata's student loan payments were more than \$500 a month. So again she found herself in a situation where she couldn't work full time, repay the loans and support her family. On top of that, she estimated that her ex-husband now owed \$44,000.

"I owed \$42,000 in student loans. So of course I thought, 'I have to take him back (to court). I don't have a choice. I have to take him back, get these loans paid off and then I can take a job,'" she said. "The first thing I did after I passed the bar exam and received my law license was start my case."

It took nearly five years and several court appearances, but Takata finally got what she asked for: an increase in child support, plus interest on what her ex-husband had not paid, and back pay for health insurance premiums that had not been paid plus interest.

"It shouldn't be like that," she said.

Takata realized during her case that other custodial parents also had to be in a position where they were not getting their child support, couldn't afford an attorney, were not getting the help they needed from state agencies and didn't know their rights.

"It just dawned on me that there has to be a lot of moms out there like me, like I was in 1990," she said. "That's when I decided, 'You know what? I'm going to write a book.' "

Takata said although the majority of people in this situation are women, more men are going to court trying to get support from moms who are failing to pay.

Takata also has a more in-depth book available that is intended to be used as a reference tool for attorneys and judges.

"CATLAW Complete" is an 80-plus page child support enforcement and modification reference book for Illinois family law professionals and custodial parents who have some legal knowledge. The publication contains more than 350 citations to rules, statutes and cases, and it comes with more than 25 sample pleadings, draft orders and winning memorandums and briefs on disk.

"This is not only a valuable tool for a custodial parent who wants to go in and get child support enforced, I think it could be a very valuable tool for new family court lawyers and judges. This is the most complete reference on Illinois child support laws. I update it every year, and the

2002-03 version is ready."

Takata now operates her own family law practice in Peoria County and litigates in Tazewell, Peoria, Woodford and surrounding counties. She insists on keeping the cost of her books as low as possible so they are more accessible to people of all income levels.

"I think this is a book that will help people find answers and enable them to get the money that is owed to them," she said. "It doesn't do families, the system or the courts any good to let these guys get away with not paying their support. My hope is that this book will help a lot of people."