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THE GOOD THAT LAWYERS DO

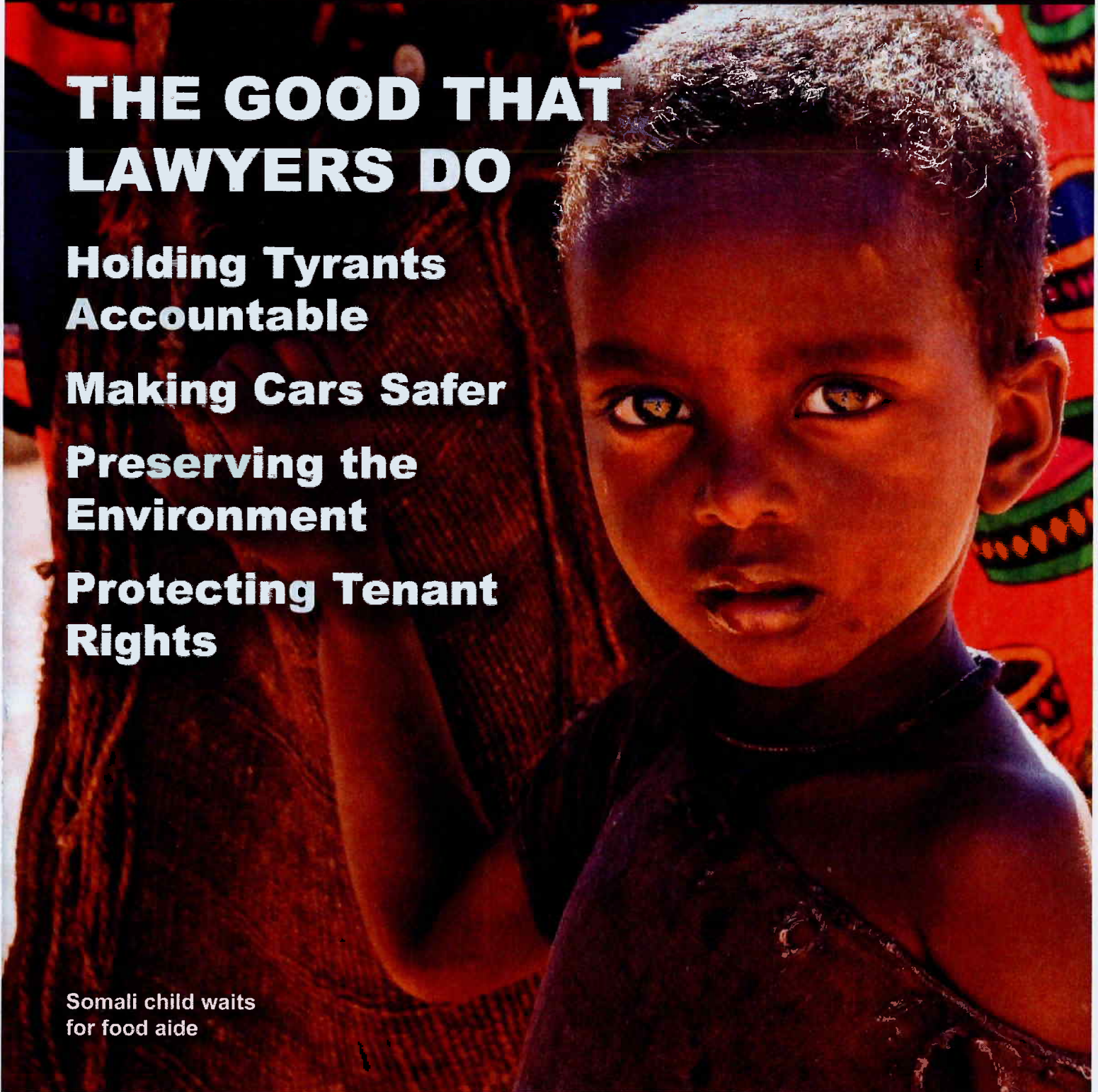
**Holding Tyrants
Accountable**

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**Preserving the
Environment**

**Protecting Tenant
Rights**

Somali child waits
for food aide



Making a difference

By J.G. Preston, CAOC Press Secretary

When it appeared there would no longer be a shelter for homeless families in Santa Ana, attorneys from Aitken Aitken Cohn stepped up and joined several law firms from across Orange County to negotiate an agreement with the city that allowed the existing shelter to expand and improve, and more importantly continue.

It wasn't a move that added to the firm's bottom line. But it was a move that exemplified "The Good That Lawyers Do" in our communities.

The work consumer attorneys do to benefit society goes beyond the work we earn fees to perform. We plan to put the spotlight on the work our members volunteer to take on to make a difference where they live. By doing so we hope more attorneys will get involved in similar efforts and will also share their stories.

In Santa Ana, the Orange County Catholic Worker provides food to the homeless of the area and shelter to women and children who are most at risk living on the streets. Wylie Aitken says the Catholic Worker's Isaiah House shelter



Isaiah House in Santa Ana was kept open due to the joint efforts of several legal firms and updated by volunteer contractors

had become controversial in Santa Ana in 2004, when city officials tried to shut it down using zoning laws.

Aitken said, "We were developing a significant homeless problem in Santa Ana, and it got to where they were housing more than 100 individuals, particularly women and young children."

When city officials declared the house to be a "mission" that was restricted by city zoning laws to be in an industrial area, and tried to shut down the shelter on the basis that it was not in an industrial area, Aitken Aitken Cohn went to work to keep the doors open – by, in their words, joining "one of the world's largest law firms."

"Almost every firm you could think of in Orange County – business firms, litigation firms, corporate firms and the Orange County Public Law Center were involved," Aitken recalled. "We had a meeting of all the top lawyers to take on the cases as a group representation pro bono."

Aitken said the group's efforts to work with the city weren't successful at first. But after a federal court action was filed, arguing religious freedom trumped the zoning ordinance, an agreement was reached that allowed Isaiah House to stay open. "Finally the city realized they were taking on something that was not only a political and human disaster but legally inappropriate," Aitken said.

"The deal we eventually negotiated involved making substantial improvements to the house property," said Darren Aitken, a partner of Aitken Aitken Cohn and Wylie's son. "The city's complaint was the site needed to have adequate heating, a proper kitchen, and appropriate sanitation for where people were sleeping in the back of the property. What our team of lawyers did was find a group of contractors willing to donate their time and services, and then we started fundraising."

Cases that make a difference

If you or your firm worked on a case that made a difference for your client or your community, please let us know.

Send information about the changes that resulted from your case to Sharon Scott at sharon@caoc.org.

In the end more than \$200,000 was raised, plus the value of the donated services. "Isaiah House is in substantially better condition as a result," Darren Aitken said. "They re-did the entire heating system, made major improvements to the plumbing and the kitchen, and added storage in the backyard for food and the belongings of the residents."

Wylie Aitken says at least 60 individuals live in Isaiah House now, families exclusively a core component. And the facility provides more than 200 meals every Sunday, with many area lawyers among those who volunteer as servers.

The work to save Isaiah House may pay additional dividends. "If another major need comes up," said Wylie Aitken, "we now have the blueprint for how the law firms here can work together."

Another example of lawyers volunteering their services to help people in crisis is in San Francisco, where Miles Cooper is part of a Bar Association of San Francisco program that provides free attorney services to renters being evicted from their homes.

"The underlying issue is, usually the tenant has hit hard times and couldn't pay the rent," Cooper said. "The landlord usually has a good argument. And usually these tenants are in rent-controlled apartments where the owners may be desperate to get the tenants out so they can raise the rent."

Cooper describes his work on these cases as obtaining justice for the unempowered. "Usually they're on the edge [financially] to begin with," he said. "Then they suffer an injury, or they lose a job, or something happens with their child, and they miss a rent payment." Most of the cases he takes on involve

long-term tenants who may face eviction after one missed payment.

"I make it a rule not to accept a client before I meet them," said Cooper, who typically takes on four of these cases per year. "I go to their house because it's the

He takes the cases because he believes his clients help make San Francisco a better city.

best way to understand what's going on in their life. I'll spend several hours over a weekend getting to know the client."

He takes the cases because he believes his clients help make San Francisco a better city. "If these people are evicted, they'll never be able to live in the city again, because they won't be able to find another place they can afford. And the diversity in the city would be lacking if all these people were forced to leave."

By taking the cases, Cooper is typically able to help his client stay put. "Every single case I've gotten involved in has settled within 48 hours, once the other side realizes they'll actually go to trial," he said. "Most settle with a 'pay and stay,' a contract where the tenant pays the back rent over a period of time and gets to stay in place. Some tenants decide they prefer to move. In that case the landlord will typically give them time to do so and frequently will pay them to move."

These are just a couple of examples of consumer attorneys who think their work is not just about making a buck but making a difference. We look forward to sharing what you do. ■

San Bruno volunteers

If you want to volunteer legal assistance to victims of the San Bruno explosion, please contact United Policyholders:

info@unitedpolicyholders.org

www.unitedpolicyholders.org/sanbruno2010.html



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