

Fathers' rights attorney rebuilds international family ties

By Patrick Drazen

Most attorneys don't get told that, if they show up for a child custody hearing, they'll go home in a body bag. However, that did not deter tenacious Chicago attorney Jeffery M. Leving, who has heard exactly those chilling words. A client saw his children spirited away to the Middle East by his ex-wife. Her mother, who aided in the abduction, was briefly imprisoned, but then deported.

Jeffery M. Leving is this father's last hope.

One father, a Polish athlete, lost touch with his son when his mother took the child to America while the father was on tour. It took three years, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, and legal eagle Jeffery Leving before the father could see his son again. Leving does not give up.

Leving's practice of Family Law has taken him to the U.S. Supreme Court. He traveled extensively during the battle over the fate of Cuban refugee Elian Gonzalez. Leving fought feverishly so that the child, whose mother was lost at sea, could be reunited with his father.



Although Leving and his staff of attorneys do most of their work in the area of paternity, divorce and custody matters, the focus also extends to seeking the recovery and protection of missing and exploited children throughout the world. Their fathers are often short-changed in a system that does not always recognize a father as a parent, or view a child as needing a father's love and protection.

Leving earned his Juris Doctor degree in 1979, and in a few

years had started his own firm, with a unique concentration in the rights of fathers. He has since then assembled a team of highly skilled attorneys, licensed to practice in Illinois as well as other states, who share his passion to rid the legal system of a gender bias. "Somebody really needs to do something to seek legislative and social reform to protect old-fashioned family values," Leving says.

Among his other accomplishments, he is proudest of having

co-authored the 1986 Illinois Joint Custody Law. He has also drafted legislation criminalizing paternity fraud, and seeking lessened child support payments for fathers who are deployed overseas in the military. This last piece of legislation is also being discussed in California, in hopes of getting that state's legislature to enact a law based on Leving's legislative initiative.

Leving has found a wide media audience for his message, through television and radio interviews and print media. He has appeared with Bill O'Reilly, Larry King, Geraldo Rivera, Oprah Winfrey, Ted Kopell, and many other broadcast journalists analyzing fathers' issues. He even hosts his own call-in television program, *Chicago Counterpoint*, on Chicago's CAN-TV 21, and writes *Dads Talk*, a weekly newspaper column.

In 1997 he wrote *Father's Rights* (published by Basic Books) with Kenneth A. Dachman, Ph.D. It's been described as containing "hard-hitting and fair advice" on how fathers can and must stay involved in the lives of their children.

On March 11, 2004, Governor

Rod Blagojevich named Leving the Chairman of the newly-created Council on Responsible Fatherhood for the State of Illinois. This was only his most recent honor: in 2002 he and fellow attorneys Duane St. Pierre and James Hagler received the "Brothers in Arms" Award for their work on fathers' rights. The American Coalition for Fathers and Children gave Leving a special award for his success in the Elian Gonzalez case. In 1998 he received the Award of Merit from the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children.

A quarter of a century after graduating from law school, Jeffery M. Leving is not close to retiring. He keeps up a grindingly busy schedule, driven by his commitment to his belief that fathers and children must stay connected. Whether the father is separated by reason of divorce, imprisonment or, more recently, military deployment with no fixed end in sight, bonds can easily be shattered and lives can easily be ruined. Hard-nosed litigator Jeffery M. Leving exists to reconnect those bonds, because the strength of the future lies in the strength of the children.