

SYLVESTER BROWN JR.

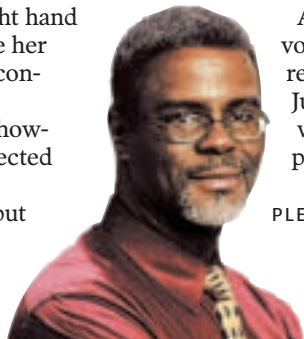
Childrens advocate turns tough gig into labor of love, hope

Luciana Bowens is a profile in duality. Solidly built, the 5-foot-9 single mother strikes an imposing figure, especially as she tools around on her sleek, royal blue motorcycle.

Yet, Bowens, 33, speaks with a gentle voice. Her shy laughter incorporates her whole body — her eyes squint, her right hand quickly covers her mouth, while her shoulders bob up and down uncontrollably.

Bowens' demeanor changes, however, when she talks about neglected or abused children.

"I'm shy in my personal life, but



when it comes to advocating for children ... I'm a lion."

For the past eight years, Bowens has served as a volunteer advocate for the nonprofit Voices for Children. The local agency provides legal counsel and serves children in foster care. Late last year, she was named the "Volunteer of the Year" by Missouri Court Appointed Special Advocates.

It takes a certain kind of tough benevolence to serve as a child advocate. Even on its website (www.voicesforchildrenstl.org), the agency warns that the job isn't for everyone. Juvenile Court judges in St. Louis city assign advocates difficult cases. With more than 2,000 children in the foster care system, these overloaded judges need advocates to help them understand the intricacies of each child's circumstance.

Advocates have to meet everyone involved in a child's life — foster parents, relatives, teachers, therapists, doctors. Judges use advocates' recommendations when deciding where a child will live, if parents will be granted visitation rights or

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sylvesterbrown@post-dispatch.com
314-340-8374

SUSAN WEICH

Head injury, not helmet, now limits family's freedom

Don Koenig is 60 and lives independently, but he still relies on his mother to help him.

She's taped a sign on the back of the front door of his tidy home in Dellwood that says "No Work." It's written in red ink, and the words are underlined several times.

For 26 years, Koenig was a part-time custodian at Lemasters Elementary School down the hill from his home, but he lost his job a year ago because of some changes in the district.

He has trouble remembering that. Sometimes he shows up for



his lunch shift at the school anyway, and the office has to call his mom to take him home.

"The problem is that Don thinks he goes to work from 11 to 1, so I am still working with him on that," said his mother, Nancy Koenig, 85. "I guess I need to get a bigger sign."

Like many survivors of traumatic brain injury, short-term memory loss is a big problem for Don Koenig. But it's just one of the results of a bad choice he made more than three decades ago when he rode his motorcycle without a helmet.

I met with the Koenigs last week as they and Maureen Cunningham of the Brain Injury Association of Missouri geared up for a fight over a state bill — one that would allow motorcyclists who are at least 21 to ride without helmets on most of the state's roads and highways. Supporters says helmets limit their enjoyment of the ride.

"That would be asking for big-time trouble," Don Koenig told me.

He's right. Helmet use decreases motorcycle fatalities by 37 percent and serious injuries such as Koenig's by 67 percent,

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sweich@post-dispatch.com
636-255-7207

BROWN | FROM C1

Advocate spreads love, hope

What therapy and educational assistance a child may receive.

Most folks aren't equipped to deal with children who have experienced horrendous types of abuse and neglect. It's hard to distinguish between acts of insolence and subtle cries for help.

Bowens, who describes herself as a "volunteer junkie," has lived a life that has suited her for the challenge.

Before her parents, Gay Eason and Navy officer Raymond Bowens, were divorced in 1983, Luciana and her older sister moved from one Naval base to another. They attended at least 10 different schools. That "out of place" feeling that many children from broken homes grapple with is familiar territory for Bowens.

There was no laughter in her voice when she described how she was sexually molested at a young age. Bowens kept the incident from her parents until adulthood. Later, at 19, she became pregnant. Bowens and the baby's father, a military man, never married.

"I was blessed. I was somewhat grounded and got through it," she told me. "But I know how easy it is for girls, especially those who have been sexually abused, to have emotional problems and wind up pregnant. It's so easy to become stressed and overwhelmed and find yourself trapped in a downward spiral."

One of Bowens' first volunteer efforts was spurred by tragedy. Her daughter's father suffered from leukemia and passed away in 1998.

The incident motivated Bowens to donate bone marrow. The act was validated when she learned that a man the same age as her daughter's father received the marrow.

Bowens came to St. Louis in

1999 from Washington state to be with her mother, a native St. Louisan. Her mother was undergoing brain surgery at the time.

Two years later, Bowens trained to become a Voices for Children advocate. She thought it would be a good way to work with kids and do meaningful volunteer work.

Bowens has had several "clients" over the years and now represents nine kids.

The University City resident balances the needs of her two children (ages 14 and 10), her job as an accounts processor with the Metropolitan Sewer District

and the demands of her case load.

"Luciana is an outstanding volunteer, not only because of her dedication but her ability to relate to teenagers," Laura Nolle Ragan, a spokeswoman for Voices for Children, wrote when she contacted me about Bowens.

It's not easy, Bowens confessed. Building trust is key. She's used to youngsters who "act out, curse you out and try to push you away."

Sometimes, it's a test of wills.

"It's like they're saying, 'Let me show you my worst side first, just to see if you'll stay,'" Bowens said.

She has stayed. She has listened. She has waited for barriers to melt and to forge relationships of trust.

Her story about overcoming odds, even after becoming pregnant at a young age, resonates with kids, Bowens said. "They see that I did it and some think, 'I can do this, too.'"

She also deals with a system that is overloaded. Sometimes, Bowens said with a laugh, "I bump heads with officials." And supervisors have cautioned her about becoming emotionally attached to her clients.

It's advice Bowens sometimes ignores.

"If I see something I feel is wrong, I'm advocating for the child, even if it means going toe-to-toe with a foster parent, caseworker or anyone else involved with that child," she said.

Ragan with Voices for Children sent me a long list of

Bowens' success stories. With one of her first cases, Bowens helped two teenage girls who were about to "age out" of the foster care system successfully transition to independent living. In another case, Bowens discovered that a foster child had been separated from his grandmother for years because of a caseworker's "personal dislike" for the relative, Ragan wrote. Thanks to Bowens, a judge granted guardianship to the grandmother.

Of all the stories, though, Bowens talked most about "her failure."

A few years ago, she represented a teenage mother whom everyone, including the girl's caseworker, had abandoned, Bowens said. Officials demanded that the girl and her

4-month-old daughter be cut off from services previously outlined by the courts. As Ragan described it, Bowens went to bat for the girl, arguing that she could become a "stable and successful parent" with help.

It didn't turn out that way. The teen regressed and eventually lost the court's support.

"I felt like I couldn't touch her heart," Bowens whispered. "She just wasn't ready."

Despite a few setbacks, she has no intention of quitting. "As long as I can volunteer, help somebody or touch a young life, I'm happy," Bowens said.

It's a tough gig. But after a while, a few troubled kids come to trust a shy but tough motorcycle-riding mom as someone who will fight on their behalf.



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