Blue Pinwheels: Child Abuse Prevention Month

Blue pinwheel gardens will appear around Michigan in April as the state marks Child Abuse Prevention Month. Prevent Child Abuse America began the “Pinwheels for Prevention” campaign in 2008, and blue pinwheels have become common sights on courthouse lawns and in front of child advocacy centers across Michigan and the United States.

Lapeer County Prosecutor John Miller is wearing a blue pinwheel lapel pin as he sits behind his desk on the second floor of the Lapeer County Complex Building. As a prosecutor, he says his goal is to educate the public and to get it more involved protecting kids. “We do the pinwheels out in front of the courthouse building,” he says, “and I hope at some point this year to take on a new endeavor, to actually have a town hall meeting with our public on some of the things we deal with involving children, because a lot of people ask me ‘what can I do?’”

Down the street from the state Capitol, the Ingham County Prosecutor's Office has a unit dedicated to protecting children. “Child abuse is a horrible crime,” Prosecutor John Dewane says, “Children are unable to protect themselves, so we take these cases very seriously.” Prosecutor Dewane and his team in the Crimes Against Children Unit cooperate with the Small Talk Children's Advocacy Center in child abuse cases and work to build community awareness. “We participate with the windmills, placing those outside of the courthouse” Dewane says, “and I will typically attend any events that are at the Capitol.”

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Lake County’s Percy Langster  
Honoring America’s First Elected Black Prosecutor

During Black History Month in February, PAAM honored the legacy of America’s first elected Black prosecutor, Percy Langster of Lake County, Michigan.

The 1948 elections are best remembered in history for Harry Truman’s come-from-behind win over Thomas Dewey, but, in northern Michigan that same year, history was made. Fifty-nine year old Percy Langster, a 1932 graduate of Duquesne University’s Law School, defeated the incumbent Lake County Prosecutor with 53% of the vote. After his victory, Langster said “I campaigned for justice to all and bias toward no man, and somehow, I think, the people grasped hold of that idea.”

Percy Langsford and his wife, Marie, had settled in Lake County in 1933. In the ensuing decade, Langster built a law practice and served his country as an advisor with the Army Air Corps in World War II. By 1948, Lake County had already been home to the nationally famous Black summer resort of Idlewild for more than three decades. Located about three miles east of the Lake County seat of Baldwin, Idlewild’s population grew to well over 20,000 in the summer months. Regardless, Black Americans accounted for only about 25% of Lake County’s vote during the 1948 canvass.

Born in Pennsylvania in 1889, Percy Langster was admitted to Cornell University but had to leave as a Freshman because of a lack of funds. He spent the next 16 years working as a waiter and Pullman porter and saved enough to attend Duquesne University, earning a bachelor's degree in 1928 and a law degree four years later. U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder made note of Langster’s legacy while speaking at the centennial of Duquesne Law in 2011.

Defeated for reelection in 1950, the Lake County Star reported that Langster accepted his loss “with his usual courtesy and grace.” Percy Langster died in 1954 at the age of 64. In 2023, he was honored by the Michigan Bar Association as the recipient of their 44th Legal Milestone. PAAM continues to honor this trailblazer for his groundbreaking achievement, his ability to find common ground, and his commitment to his community.
Beards and Books
How a Prosecutor Helped Kids During Reading Month

Muskegon County Prosecutor D.J. Hilson spent National Reading Month in March growing a set of whiskers while raising funds to put books into the hands of local kids. The Beards for Books Challenge, sponsored by United Way of the Lakeshore, found Prosecutor Hilson and about two dozen other community leaders in Muskegon, Ottawa, and Oceana Counties, growing their beards to help provide a free book every month to kids along the lakeshore between birth and the age of five. “The purpose of the money we raise is to fund the postage for the Dolly Parton Imagination Library,” Hilson said. “Dolly Parton has raised the money to pay the authors, do the publishing and all the printing, and we raise the money to help those books get shipped for free.”

Beards for Books has a matching sponsor in 2024 and every dollar donated is matched on a dollar-for-dollar basis. Prosecutor Hilson says contributions are dollars well spent. “Ultimately, kids zero to five years old can have a free book delivered to them every month, a different book every month. Learning to read is a powerful skill and I still remember the joy of reading to my kids when they were real little.” As a bonus, the Prosecutor adds, “It gives me an excuse to grow a beard.”

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In Alger County, in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula, Prosecutor Rob Steinhoff says that protecting kids is a core part of his mission as an elected prosecutor. “In the Alger County Prosecutor’s Office, we do not accommodate second chances when children are involved.” Steinhoff points to a recent conviction on a Child Abuse-Second Degree charge as reflecting the gravity that both his office and the community it represents view child abuse. The defendant was accused of dragging his 11-year old son out of bed, causing his head to ricochet off the floor, and then striking the child with a belt numerous times. “No child should have to endure this. Protecting the most vulnerable in our community is a priority for me as a prosecutor, not just during Child Abuse Prevention Month in April, but year round.”