

He was an orphan. Now he's a lawyer to the stars on a mission to help foster kids!

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The bar at Ella was packed the other night, as it is whenever money people are in town trying to have their way with legislators. All the stools and tables were occupied.

Miles Cooley, a high-end entertainment lawyer from L.A., was bending an elbow with lobbyist Duncan McFetridge, a partner at Mercury Public Affairs who represents Lyft, Wells Fargo and other fancy clients with problems. Ed Howard was there, too. He represents people who don't pay nearly as much but have a far greater need for advocates, foster kids.

The topic at hand had nothing to do with billable hours. It was far more personal. Years ago, Cooley's last name was Robinson and he was in kindergarten living with his troubled mother in an apartment near the railroad tracks in midtown Sacramento. He thinks it was on Q Street but isn't quite sure.

She had him when she was 17 in 1969, and fell in with a tough crowd, bikers. She'd leave for days at a time. One day he came home, and "she was lying on the floor dead." She had overdosed. He was 5.

His father, a drummer named Miles Robinson, was in no position to care for a child. Nor was his grandmother. A family in Davis adopted him, but that didn't work out, and he rotated through foster homes and finally to the Sacramento Children's Home on Sutterville Road.

He can't remember ever having a lawyer represent him, though others did look out for him, notably a Davis school psychologist, Leslie Cooley. She'd take him fishing and skiing, and bring him to her Land Park home.

He was a new kid at McClatchy High School in 1984 and was riding his bike when he recognized another new kid, Duncan McFetridge, washing his car, an old Mustang, in the front yard. They started talking and haven't stopped since.

Books were after-thoughts in high school. Miles Cooley and McFetridge were far more interested in one-on-one basketball games and the wild things best high school friends do that are best left unstated once they become adults. "He always brought me into the fold," Cooley said.

Until a few years ago, foster care ended for orphans once they turned 18. The law had determined they were adults, and the state expected them to fend for themselves. Miles got a break when Leslie Cooley adopted him, giving him his last name along with stability, encouragement and love, all the stuff a mother provides.

Miles Cooley and McFetridge enrolled at Sacramento City College. From there, Cooley went to UC Berkeley and McFetridge went to San Francisco State. Cooley joined the Peace Corps and went to Berkeley's school of law. They still shoot hoops when they get the chance.

Cooley, a partner at the firm Kelley Drye, bills up to \$850 an hour representing people who are or will be stars, handling their contracts and disputes, like Rihanna's 2013 spat with a home-inspection service that failed to detect flaws in her \$6.9 million Beverly Hills home.

It is a long way from the crummy midtown apartment near the railroad tracks. But Cooley hasn't forgotten that place, and so he pitches in. In 2010, he lobbied for a bill backed by his friend John Burton, the former Senate president pro tem who created a foundation to help foster children, that requires the state to care for foster kids [until they turn 21](#). That was a major advance.

Now the issue is helping kids in dependency court. Howard represents the University of San Diego School of Law's Children's Advocacy Institute and has been trying for years to ensure that foster kids have lawyers.

As it is, dependency court lawyers have impossibly large caseloads, averaging 225 kids. It's far [worse in some counties](#). Tulare, for example, has one lawyer for every 450 kids. L.A. County has a ratio of one lawyer for 325 kids.

This year, Howard enlisted a friend, lobbyist Kim Stone, to help out. She was scrolling through Facebook one day in January and saw that McFetridge had posted a [piece by my colleague Cathie Anderson](#) detailing Cooley's story and his plan to help commemorate the 150-year anniversary of the Sacramento Children's Home. When Stone and Howard asked him to help, he didn't hesitate.

Cooley, in turn, enlisted his buddy McFetridge. So while big-money people were buttonholing legislators this week, Cooley, Howard, Stone and McFetridge focused on another mission, one aimed at helping the children of other troubled mothers.

"We need the legislators up here to understand that this is a priority for the people of the state," Cooley said.

The request is modest: [\\$22 million out of a \\$3.6 billion](#) court budget in an overall state budget of \$170 billion-plus. If lawmakers add the \$22 million, caseloads would be reduced to 188 cases per attorney, still too high but a start.

Legislators rarely say no to kids issues, not directly. But there always are [other calls on money](#), by people and groups with clout. It's easy to forget foster kids. But maybe not this year, not when a high-end entertainment lawyer and his best buddy, the blue chip lobbyist, are pitching in.