

Ted Hires: Champion for Victims' Rights

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happened six times with my stores through the years. I knew I had a cell phone in my vehicle. I also knew I had a gun I could protect myself with. So I made the split-second decision to follow them, get on the phone with the police and get them caught."

Hires and his assistant manager gave chase and ultimately the criminals were caught. He said then his experience with the criminal justice system started in earnest.

"You're a non-person," he said of dealing with the criminal justice system. "It was the 'State vs.... My name appeared nowhere, my people's (employees) names appeared nowhere."

He said he had no idea where to begin in creating the Justice Coalition. "But, the more I stood up for myself in the process, other victims started coming to me telling their stories and every one of them was just as outrageous, how they got treated by the system," he said. "So I said, 'something has got to be done about this.'"

Hires said he met with several friends, including people involved in political campaigns. To make the Coalition work he knew he had to find a way to capture the attention and hearts of the community. Rather than a political campaign for a particular victim, his would be a campaign for the rights of victims.

He said with the support of his family he took on the challenge of creating the Coalition. "You had to change people's perceptions, their mindsets. You had to show how victims were being treated by the system, that you needed their help to get the system changed."

The Coalition became a powerful force for victims. They successfully lobbied for tougher laws. They lobbied judges and other elected officials. They monitored courtrooms and they worked with police. They successfully lobbied for a myriad of victims' rights legislation, including requiring criminals to serve 85 percent of their sentences.

Hires said the Justice Coalition has three objectives which are printed in each issue of the organization's paper, the *Victim's Advocate*:

- To advocate for innocent victims of violent crime,
- To educate the general public on criminal justice issues,
- To be proactive in the fight against crime.

The *Victim's Advocate* prints the pictures and names of wanted suspects, information

about unsolved murders and people arrested for prostitution. The paper also features such articles as how to avoid crime, what to do if one becomes a victim and coping with criminal victimization. The sheriff and mayor are regular contributors to the paper.

Hires said the organization can only afford to print 35,000 copies of the newspaper, but the demand is there for more than 75,000 issues. He said the Justice Coalition has an operating budget of \$350,000.

"We stay maxed out," he said of all the victims seeking help from the Coalition. Even though the Coalition helps as many people as it can, more victims than they have resources for need help. He said the Coalition has helped more people than some organizations with much bigger budgets.

He estimates he has spent about \$500,000 of his own money to help the Coalition, not counting the many hours of time he devoted to the project. "I really believe that's what helped make it successful, that I believed in it enough to put my own money into it." He said he was careful to keep the name of his business out of it, because he did not want people thinking he was in it for publicity.

Hires said the Coalition fought for sentences that matched the severity of the crime, so they began a court watch program. To that end, report cards were kept on each judge. Once, the *Victim's Advocate* newspaper even printed judges' official phone numbers. He said he urged people to contact the judges to give their positive and negative opinions.

His methods, he said, angered some judges. "I had some of them ask me, 'Who do you think you are, coming into my courtroom?' I said, 'I got a flash for you, judge; this ain't your courtroom. This belongs to the people. And you know what, judge? We're going to keep a report card on you, and when election time comes, if you don't pass, we're going to help somebody take your job that believes in doing the right thing.'"

However, Hires said the Coalition has worked well with judges over the years. "Most of the judges support our cause 150 percent."

But Hires said despite all of the programs being implemented to thwart crime, the best one is a belief in God. He said faith needs to be put back into society and not shunned or locked up in

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