

Determined prosecutor combats trafficking with novel tactics

Operating out of KC, she has prosecuted more such cases than any other assistant U.S. attorney.

By MARK MORRIS
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Kansas City's move to become a national leader in human trafficking prosecutions began in the spring of 2006, when a newly appointed U.S. attorney held his first staff meeting.

Bradley Schlozman announced that he intended to make trafficking one of his top priorities and asked for volunteers.

Cynthia Cordes, a young career prosecutor who had joined the office barely two years earlier, stepped forward, and over the next three years prosecuted 36 alleged traffickers — more than any other assistant U.S. attorney in the country. Most of those have been domestic sex trafficking cases.

Cordes, who divides her

time between human trafficking, computer crimes and child exploitation cases, has earned a reputation as a tough, tenacious and creative prosecutor.

U.S. Attorney Matt Whitworth said Cordes, who heads the local Human Trafficking Rescue Project, has been a key player in attacking such issues.

"Her diligence in aggressively prosecuting these cases has helped to give the Western District of Missouri one of the most successful task forces in the nation," Whitworth said. "She works tirelessly to combat modern-day slavery and raise public awareness. Her innovative approach in several significant cases has become a model for federal prosecutors throughout the Department of Justice."

Last August, Linda Smith,

president of Shared Hope International, praised Cordes as a "pioneer" for using a federal human-trafficking law to prosecute customers who allegedly tried to pay for sex with children.

Since then, at least five other U.S. attorney's offices, from Virginia to Alabama, have prosecuted other defendants using Cordes' aggressive approach, Smith noted.

"I hope if anything can be learned from our task force's success, it is that human trafficking can be anywhere in the United States," Cordes said. "Human traffickers are the most successful when they target the most meek and weak in our community."

Some criminal defense lawyers, however, are less enthusiastic. They grumble privately that she is unyielding and slow to turn over case records.

But no defense lawyer has been harsher in his criticism than Eric Chase, a Californian who came to Kansas City to

defend St. Joseph pharmacist Walter Sewell on child pornography charges.

In the case against Sewell, Cordes sought to use a novel interpretation of child pornography law to increase his mandatory minimum sentence from five to 15 years. Cordes contended that Sewell's use of file-sharing computer software made him a mass distributor of child porn who constantly revictimized the children whose images he distributed.

Chase described Cordes' pursuit of his client as "malodorous," "vicious," and "mean-spirited" and confidently predicted that she would be reversed on appeal.

But that process only earned Cordes a bigger fan base.

Last year, the U.S. Supreme Court declined to hear the case, leaving in place a 15-year sentence based on Cordes' interpretation of the statute.



Cordes