

# NEIGHBORS

## Attorney wants Angels' Arms

*St. Charles County needs a group home for foster children, says Jennifer Suits.*

**BY ESTHER TALBOT FENNING**  
*Special to the Post-Dispatch*

Children's advocate Jennifer Suits says a critical need exists for a group home for foster children in St. Charles County. She describes foster parents and social service agencies that rescue abused and neglected children as heroes who battle daily on the front lines for children's rights.

"They don't get a lot of return other than the satisfaction that they're helping a child," Suits said. "We need more of them and more support for them."

Suits is a licensed attorney and a guardian ad litem, a court-appointed attorney who represents children in court actions such as divorce and custody cases as well as

abuse and neglect cases where the child has been removed from the home. She is a certified court mediator for families and businesses, helping them reach an amicable resolution rather than become embroiled in litigation.

On a volunteer basis, she serves as webmaster and all-round helper for Angels' Arms, a St. Louis-based nonprofit charitable organization that provides a home for foster children. Suits contends that a facility similar to Angels' Arms is essential in St. Charles County and especially important for sibling groups separated in foster homes.

Suits cited a recent case concerning a 15-year-old girl living in a foster home in Warren County. Four of her sisters and brothers were separated, in groups of two.

"It's terrible to watch them be ripped apart," she said. "Some of the younger kids cry. They don't understand why they aren't in their own home and don't know why their brothers and sisters are being pulled away."

Suits says foster parents in Mis-

souri get the least amount of compensation in the country. The St. Charles County foster care system had 270 foster children last year, she said. Some are in the system for a couple of days and others for years. On any given day, Suits said, the system has 105 children.

To add to the frustration, she said, funding is frequently cut for social services even as population in the county expands. Three years ago, 75 foster homes were licensed, compared with 47 today.

Angels' Arms was founded by Bess and Larry Wilfong six years ago. A home was purchased and rehabbed two years ago on Tesson Ferry Road in St. Louis County. House parents Becky and Jesse Hughes live in the home and care for a dozen children up to 18 years old. The home has two kitchens, two laundry rooms, five bedrooms, two family rooms and a large outside play area.

Suits cited Angels' Arms as a unique concept in foster home care and a worthwhile model to emulate. She maintains a list of people in the community who, she said, would support a similar facility in St. Charles County.

She lamented that state vouchers that provide funding for children in transition to foster care are mere pittance. Angels' Arms is supported by residents of the St. Louis area who donate clothing, personal items and toys and meet other needs for the children.

Suits, 41, lives in the Harvester area of St. Charles County where she is the proprietor of Stonebridge Consulting and Conflict Solutions. Her father served as an administrator for the St. Louis County Juvenile Court for 45 years, and her mother was a court reporter. Suits

- **What:** Attorney and children's advocate who volunteers for Angels' Arms, a group foster home in south St. Louis County.
- **Goal:** A facility in St. Charles County similar to Angels' Arms.
- **Age:** 41.
- **Residence:** St. Charles County.
- **Information:** E-mail Suits at jsuits@mediatestl.com.

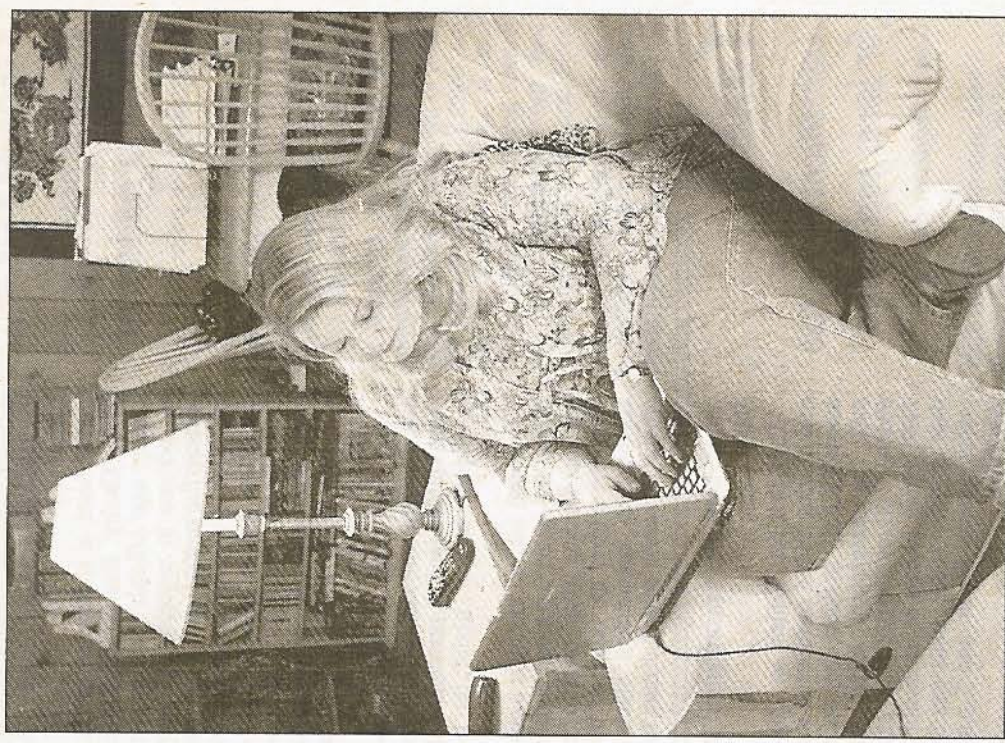
recalled that the family lived in Manchester when cows grazed next to her subdivision.

Suits was a member of the first graduating class of Parkway South High School. She received undergraduate degrees in philosophy and English literature and a minor in photography from Maryville University. She holds a law degree from St. Louis University Law School, a master's degree in taxation law and is trained to be a court-certified mediator.

She practiced law for five years in Santa Fe, N.M. She moved to St. Charles 10 years ago to be close to her sister, Andrea Dietrich, and Dietrich's son, Sam, 10. Suits is divorced, has no children and is engaged to be married. She admits that she doesn't have what it takes to be a foster parent but is passionate about children.

As a business lawyer, Suits has a background in mergers and acquisition, real estate and commercial transactions. She said business law was satisfying but couldn't be compared to making a difference in a child's life.

"A place like Angels' Arms in our community would make a big difference in a lot of children's lives, and I'm going to do all I can to make it happen," she said.



LARRY WILLIAMS / POST-DISPATCH

**Jennifer Suits, 41, relaxes in her garden last week on a spring-like day. She is trying to establish a group foster home in St. Charles County.**

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## County's children need Angels' Arms, says attorney

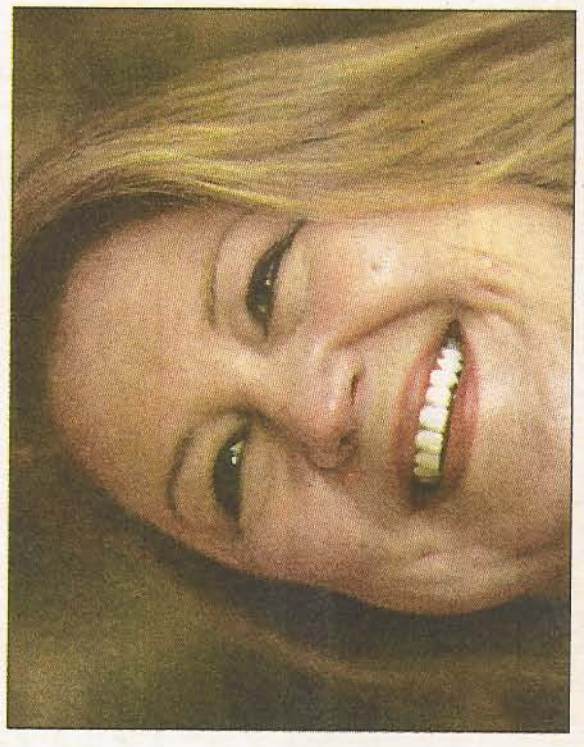
Jennifer Suits is on the front lines in the fight for children.

She describes foster parents and social service agencies that rescue abused and neglected children as heroes who battle daily on the front lines for children's rights.

Her goal is to establish a group home in St. Charles similar to Angels' Arms, a home in St. Louis County.

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**Jennifer Suits is an attorney who represents children in custody and other cases.**

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