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Swinging for the Fences

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What does a 1974 Portland, Maine, Little League team have to do with the Children's



Defense Fund, and who is **Grace Reef?**



Twenty-four years ago this summer, a freckle-faced 12-year-old with two long braids dangling to her waist was drafted by the Teamsters Little League team in Portland, Maine. She was good—her coach described her as “an average to superior ballplayer”—but she lacked the one characteristic that was required to play Little League baseball in 1974. She didn’t wear a jock strap.

What normally would have been a happy footnote from an American childhood that summer became, for Grace Reef ’83, a test of character and, ultimately, a barrier-breaking activity.

She was Number One; it said so right on her uniform. The first girl in the world to play in a sanctioned Little League program had to overcome frowning adults, mercenary lawyers and patriarchal history. Not that she cared. She had grown up in a neighborhood full of boys, winning them over with a stubborn unwillingness to “act like a girl.” So when the national Little League organization threatened to revoke the local league’s charter if Grace was allowed to play, the kid with the rabbit’s foot hanging from her belt loop decided to throw a high, hard one. She sued.

A few weeks later, Grace was playing ball, Little League, Inc., had agreed to integrate girls into its program, and another gender-based exclusion had been obliterated.

Reef has always had iron in her spine. When a reporter asked her, in the midst of her Little League ordeal, what she would do if a boy on her team got fresh with her, she replied: “Sock him in the mouth.”

Her father, Norman, a retired attorney, recalls that his daughter could argue persuasively for her position before she had even started school. “I had to watch myself when she was only three or four years old because she would talk me into a corner and box me in,” he said. “If she thinks she’s right she won’t give in.”

That moxie has been an asset during a career on Capitol Hill that has included stints on the staffs of Sen. Majority Leader George Mitchell and Democratic leader Tom Daschle and now as director of intergovernmental affairs for the Children’s Defense Fund. Nearly a quarter century after battling heavy hitters as a 12-year-old, Reef continues to push back when pushed, only now she is looking out for other people’s kids. “Children need a voice. Somebody has to look out for their needs,” she said.

An acknowledged “people person” whose charm equals her grit, Reef is an accomplished Beltway insider. She was instrumental in drafting and amending two major pieces of legislation

By Kevin Cool, photos by Hilary Schwab

Reef's Little League ordeal still motivates her advocacy on behalf of other people's

of recent years, the 1993 Family and Medical Leave Act and the 1996 welfare reform bill.

As a legislative assistant for Mitchell during her first decade out of Colby, Reef was able to put her imprint on laws that dealt with issues closest to her heart—welfare, foster care and child care. She is proudest of her role in helping push through Congress in 1990 a development block grant program that established federal funding for child care. "That was historic," she said.

She also played a key role in the adoption of the family leave legislation that provides up to three months of unpaid time off following the birth of a child or to deal with an illness of a family member. "It's really important that people not have to choose between their job and their family," Reef said.

In 1995 she went to work for Sen. Tom Daschle of South Dakota, the Democratic leader in the Senate. This time, though, the leader was in charge of the minority party. "I can tell you, having worked in both the majority and the minority, I like the majority best," Reef said.

It was during this time that a group of aggressive and ideologically zealous freshman GOP representatives arrived on The Hill, armed with the Contract For America, a document that Reef says "turned the world upside down." Passing legislation became contentious and strictly partisan, Reef says. "The Senate generally is a cordial place. The House in 1995 was different. It was a hard time," she said.

Chief among the disagreements was how to reform the country's welfare system, which Reef says "clearly was not working." Republicans, led by House Speaker Newt Gingrich, pushed for radical changes in how welfare recipients were

chosen, the duration of their eligibility and the federal responsibility in providing services. Reef acknowledges that the Republican posture moved Democrats away from their traditionally staunch defense of welfare toward a more moderate position and an understanding that Americans "were tired of people getting something for nothing." Her job, Reef says, was to bring Republicans back toward the center as well. She wrote the Democratic alternative to what she called the "draconian" bill introduced by the Republicans in the House. "It was putting women and children first, but this time they were on the gangplank," said Reef of the GOP proposal. "Basically, we were saying, 'be tough on the parents, but don't be tough on the kids.' You can't ask single mothers to go back to work and abandon their children. If there is no provision for helping to pay for child care, how can we expect those women to go out and get jobs?"

Confronted with hardened positions against any kind of federal funding for the programs, even for child care for single moms, Reef says she was able to bring a personal perspective to the debate that may have helped cement Democratic support behind Daschle's alternative bill. "I was pregnant with my son, and my daughter was about a year and a half old. I was paying almost two hundred dollars a week for her day care. When I told the members this, they were like, 'You've got to be kidding.' They were shocked."

"What it did was bring the discussion down to the level of real people and got it out of the books of charts and statistics," Reef said. "I've found when working with members [of Congress] that if you can give a real example about Sally down the block or Joe at the convenience store that people get it."

kids and her conviction that "Children need a voice."



Reef managed to bridge the broad ideological spectrum within her own party to win every Democratic vote, but still the bill was defeated. "We broke it down and offered pieces of it as amendments," she said. "We were able to amend the final bill in twenty-one areas. That was a victory."

Reef's fondness for underdogs goes way back. Norman Reef recalls that six-year-old Grace would arrange for her playmates to get free movie passes and treats when she visited her uncle, who operated a movie theater in Lewiston. "She knew those kids didn't have a lot and she wanted to do something for them," he said. "Grace was always sensitive to other people's needs, and she wasn't bashful about standing up for them."

Even knowing Grace's pluck, Norman Reef was caught off guard when his daughter, at age 10, returned home one day with a Little League uniform and announced that she had been chosen for a team. "I knew she couldn't play because girls were not allowed," he said. "She asked me if there was something I could do to keep her on the team. I explained that because the Portland fields were public we could go to court to keep the league from using them unless she was allowed to play. She didn't want that. She didn't want to spoil things for the boys."

Grace, disappointed, nevertheless continued to practice with her team and attended games to cheer them on. She sat out the next season, too, wishing from the sidelines that she could join her neighborhood friends on the field. Meanwhile, Norman Reef, who was chair of the Maine Democratic party and friends with many state legislators, quietly pushed for an amendment that would broaden the state's law against dis-

crimination to include gender. The amendment was enacted.

Grace decided as a 12-year-old, her final year of Little League eligibility, that she wanted to try out again. She was drafted but again faced the prospect of being denied the chance to play. This time, however, when she asked her attorney-father how she could fight the exclusionary rule, he had an answer. "The new state law gave us the leverage we needed. It was now a simple case of sex discrimination," he said.

The Reefs sued the local Little League chapter, its national organization and the City of Portland, claiming that Grace's right to play was guaranteed under Maine law and that attempts to abridge that right were illegal.

League officials went on the offensive, determined to maintain the long-held policy excluding girls. Some were concerned that Reef would be injured; one man was quoted as saying that girls were better suited to a modified version of baseball that used a softer ball and prohibited sliding or base stealing.

Grace's fear that she might become "the most hated kid in school" because of her suit proved unwarranted. "The boys were supportive," Reef said. "It was the parents who were hostile." She ignored the occasional catcalls from the sidelines and wondered aloud why the adults were so upset "when all I wanted was to be with my friends and have fun."

The controversy did little to dent her resolve. Neither did it soften her outspoken attitude. When officials suggested that she play in a proposed girls' league, Reef scoffed, "What fun would that be? They aren't even allowed to slide."

"I'm a little embarrassed now to read some of the things I said back then," she says. "But I was twelve. The point is I

When officials suggested that she play in a girls' league, the 12-year-old Reef scoffed,

didn't stop to think 'what's the right role for a girl?' I just wanted to have fun and didn't recognize any difference. I couldn't understand why people were so bent out of shape about me wanting to play."

Ultimately, a judge agreed. On May 28, 1974, Cumberland County Superior Court Judge Edward Stern placed a preliminary injunction upon Little League, Inc., in Williamsburg, Pa., to prohibit it from revoking the Portland league's charter, thus allowing Reef to continue to play. It marked the first time Little League had been enjoined. Two weeks later, faced with the prospect of a permanent injunction, Little League said that "due to the changing social climate," it would no longer exclude girls from participating.

In nearby Westbrook the father of nine-year-old Denise Welch, buoyed by Reef's stand, said he would challenge the minor league program that had refused his daughter the right to play. The pioneer tracks of Grace Reef, age 12, already had new sneakers in them.

More important for her, Reef got to stay with her team. On the day the ruling was announced, two years after she had relinquished her uniform because girls weren't allowed, the second baseman for the Teamsters had two hits, scored a run and turned a double play. Her average at game's end was eerily symbolic. She was batting .500.

Reef says her plan when entering Colby in 1980 was to "live in a rural area and write books. I loved Maine and I didn't see any reason why I would ever leave Maine," she said.

She arrived as a scholar-athlete with perhaps more emphasis on the athlete than the scholar, her former professors say. Sandy

Maisel, the faculty resident in Mary Low at the time, who later would become Reef's academic adviser, recalls that the first time he met her she was dribbling a basketball up and down the corridor on the floor above his apartment. "We arranged to have her moved to a floor where there was no one below her so she could go on dribbling," Maisel said.

Maisel recognized Reef as a student with enormous potential but no clear direction. He encouraged her to try a government course, a suggestion about which she was decidedly unenthusiastic. "I thought all politicians were corrupt; that it was a boring subject," Reef said. When she finally relented and took the course, she says, "I absolutely loved it."

"If it hadn't been for Sandy," Reef said, "I might be living in Millinocket trying to write a novel."

Cal Mackenzie, another of Reef's mentors at Colby, says she was ideally suited for a career in politics but that she didn't realize it until her internship with Sen. George Mitchell during the summer before her junior year. Norman Reef, who had helped arrange the internship, says his daughter wanted to back out of the commitment, but he insisted that she stick with it for at least a few weeks. "About a week later I get a phone call—'Dad, this is fantastic,'" Reef recalls. From that point, MacKenzie says, Reef had "the worst case of Potomac fever I ever saw."

Reef recalls the moment during her internship that she realized a career in the Capitol was her calling. "I was standing in a hearing room watching these guys in Gucci shoes lining up to try to get tax breaks," she said. "It occurred to me that they didn't need help being heard. There were other people out there who did."

So enamored was she with Washington that Reef told her father she wanted to transfer to a college nearer the Capitol to

'What fun would that be? They aren't even allowed to slide.'



complete her degree requirements. Norman Reef, along with Maisel, persuaded Grace to finish what she had started at Colby. Mollified for the moment, Reef nevertheless was determined to get back to Washington as quickly as possible. Despite protestations from everybody, including Maisel, she loaded two years worth of academic work into one and graduated the following May. It was an extraordinary achievement, Norman Reef says, but typical of Grace. "She just wasn't going to be denied," he said.

"I loved Colby and I hope someday my kids will go there, but at that time I was ready to leave and start a new life," Reef said. She returned to Washington jobless but determined. She accepted an unpaid internship in Mitchell's office, painting houses and performing odd jobs for six months to keep herself afloat until, in January of 1984, Mitchell offered her an entry-level job. Within two years she was a legislative assistant and by age 27 had risen to become Mitchell's senior policy advisor on human resources, poverty and economic development issues.

Mackenzie watched with pride and admiration as Reef established herself as an influential Hill staffer. "It's a perfect case of somebody finding the right place for their interests and aptitude," he said. "She was just a natural for that type of work environment."

A Bowdoin trustee, Mackenzie recalls being told by former Bowdoin president Roy Gleason following Gleason's visit to see Mitchell that he had been impressed "by this brilliant young woman named Grace Reef. She couldn't have been more than twenty-four or twenty-five," Mackenzie said.

Gleason wasn't the only College president who enjoyed Reef's conversation. "Grace delighted in the fact that when Bill Cotter came down to see George [Mitchell] he first would stop and see her," Mackenzie said.

Mackenzie, whose own Washington connections are deep and broad, says Reef has become a model for Colby graduates interested in public service. "I tell my students who want to work in Washington to call Grace Reef," he said.

In 1997 Reef left the Senate for the Children's Defense Fund, a nonprofit organization that aims to influence state and federal legislation affecting children. Reef, who educates Capitol Hill staff on children's issues, rubs shoulders with many of the same people she knew as a Senate staff member.

She moved to the CDF in part, she says, because "I didn't want my job to crowd out my family." As a Hill staffer, she often worked 14- or 16-hour days, including many weekends, and she was beginning to resent the time away from her children, Megan, 4, and Jamie, 2. She delivered her third child, Ryan, in June. "I love the Senate. I decided to leave before I hated it," she said.

Her new job demands a grueling schedule as well, but unlike her time in the Senate, when she often stayed at the office well into the evening, she now returns home by six p.m. to eat dinner, play with her children and put them to bed. "I wanted to give my family a higher priority," said Reef, whose husband, Don Green, is a policy advisor for Sen. Susan Collins of Maine.

She also is available now to give her children the guidance her parents gave her. "My parents taught me not to back down; not to be intimidated. I hope my kids grow up with the same mindset."

Will she tell them about her experience in overturning the Little League patriarchy? "When the time is right I'm sure I will," Reef said. "I want my children to know that they can be whatever they want to be; that they can do whatever they want to do."

"My daughter starts in a pee-pee soccer league this fall. She won't have to go to court to play."