

Mothers who lost children in court unite

By PAMELA PÉREZ
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NOW offers courtroom support

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DELRAY BEACH— When Deborah Niles-Pennisi appeared at the last custody hearing for her two sons, she had moral support from four women dressed in white sitting behind her with their eyes on the judge. The National Organization for Women members wanted their presence known.

"I'm sure the judge knew who we were," said Sheila Jaffe, past president of the South County chapter of NOW.

The members are ex-wives, mothers and veterans of divorce. They know how difficult it can be for women to navigate through divorce proceedings — even with

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NILES-PENNISI: Called the National Organization for Women after falling into \$100,000 legal debt.

Activists serve as watchdog

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representation from a divorce attorney.

To help women involved in custody battles, the NOW members have created a court-watch support group. The organization plans to monitor Niles-Pennisi's case to highlight it as an example of why laws need to be changed to protect women's rights in custody battles.

"I felt that NOW should take a position. We don't normally get involved in a case," Jaffe said. "Deborah persevered. The others never called back."

With few legal alternatives left, Niles-Pennisi called the organization after selling her home and falling into a \$100,000 legal debt. She now fights her battle from a room at the Ocean Lodge hotel until she can relocate.

"I did everything under the advice of professionals," Niles-Pennisi said. "Now our whole sense of security is gone."



LANNIS WATERS/Staff Photographer

WOMEN IN WHITE: Deborah Niles-Pennisi (front) Carole Williams, Gloria Stein and Sheila Jaffe, all sits in court backed by (from left) Gonzalee Ford, members of the South Palm Beach County NOW.

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SHEILA JAFFE, NOW member

The California NOW action center introduced its courtroom activism in an attempt to increase a woman's chances of winning child custody cases.

The organization's Web

site notes that fathers who contest custody "win sole or joint custody in 40 to 70 percent of cases." NOW, which provides no legal defense, has become a watchdog for mothers with its symbolic courtroom field trips.

"By simply being a presence in the courtroom with NOW buttons or other designation, activists send the message to judges, attorneys and prosecutors that

they are being watched specifically for how they treat women," according to the NOW Web site.

NOW members, Jaffe said, also plan to support Niles-Pennisi outside the courtroom — with phone calls and the wisdom of their experiences.

"I think they're really being abused by the system," Jaffe said.

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