

WASHINGTONIAN

Washingtonians of the 2009 Year

For 38 years, *The Washingtonian* has honored men and women who give their time and talent to make this a better place for all of us. Here are 2009's winners.

By Leslie Milk ■

Photographs by Matthew Worden

≡ Michele Booth Cole

A protector for kids who need one most

When the phone rings in the middle of the night, Michele Booth Cole knows what the call is about: A child is in danger. As executive director of the DC children's-advocacy center Safe Shores, it's her job to help kids who are victims of sexual or physical abuse or who have seen violence.

Once, it was a five-year-old boy who was "nonresponsive" on arrival at Children's Hospital. He'd been living with his grandmother and aunt, who wouldn't feed him unless he memorized Bible passages. When they found him with food, they beat him and submerged him in water. Unable to revive him, they

got him to the ER. Another time, a nine-year-old girl needed help. Her mother had been offering her to men for drugs.

The first step is to ensure the child's safety. Safe Shores has toys, clothes, and everything else to meet immediate needs. Interviewers talk to the victim, videotaping the session so the child has to tell his or her story only once. Safe Shores then works with police, prosecutors, doctors, and mental-health professionals to restore the child's well-being. "If we can get to them in time," Cole says, "they can heal."

Treatment helped the hungry little boy understand that

what had happened wasn't his fault. He was removed from his home, but it took time for him to develop a healthy relationship with food. In his new home, he started out hoarding food because he feared he'd starve again. After years of therapy, the nine-year-old girl is becoming "a healthy, self-reliant, compassionate young woman," Cole says. "It speaks to the resilience of the human spirit."

The economic downturn coincided with an increase in the number and severity of child-abuse cases. At the same time, Safe Shores had to cut its budget—which depends on funding from individuals, community groups,

corporations, foundations, and the DC government—by \$350,000. It still managed to serve 850 kids. Cole says people sometimes hesitate to report things they see. "Don't turn away," she urges. "Children are counting on us to protect them."

Nothing would please her more than to see Safe Shores go out of business because its services were no longer needed. Meanwhile, she'll keep answering calls in the middle of the night and speaking for kids who are too hurt to make their voices heard.

Says Cole: "We're trying to make children understand how important they are."

