

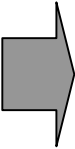
# Child-support advocate widely assailed for tactics

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Geraldine Jensen has faced down the powerful - prosecutors, bureaucrats, and state and national legislators - to get child-support payments for kids.

She has become powerful herself.

But people who have worked closest to her say that in zeal to transform a grass-roots group in Toledo into a national organization - Association for Children for Enforcement of Support, Inc. - Ms. Jensen has alienated supporters and hurt the cause she has devoted her life to since 1984.



Former associates say she has padded the group's membership, disbanded chapters over arguments with volunteers, and ordered workers to add blank envelopes to piles of mail on a day that a foundation official visited the office. And records show she has repeatedly filed tax returns containing inaccurate information about ACES' lobbying efforts.

Also, four former associates say, Ms. Jensen last year ordered volunteers to discard thousands of pleas for help.

"People would send us sheaves of paper, their divorce decrees, everything, that needed Geri's direct attention," said Valeria Graves. "If they [the letters] did not have a check in it, or money, she told us to throw it in the garbage can."

Ms. Graves ran the now defunct Lucas County chapter of ACES.

Ms. Jensen, president of the group, acknowledged she told workers to throw the letters away, but contended she did so because the group got too many letters to answer. She said everyone who wrote her or the organization was sent a pamphlet that included a request for \$10 to join ACES, a request for \$650 to buy a book, and general information about how to collect overdue child support payments.

The flood of mail was the culmination of years of work which began when Ms. Jensen founded her group at a meeting in 1984 in the dining room of her West Toledo home.

From that first gathering of 12 people - 11 women and one man - ACES has grown steadily.

It was started with almost nothing except the outrage Geraldine Jensen felt toward Lucas County officials.

She frequently repeats the story of the day she was down to \$14 and a half-pound of hamburger, a single parent on welfare with two boys to feed, and an ex-husband in Iowa who was \$12,000 behind in support payments.

One day, she said, an assistant prosecutor told her that if she didn't like the county's efforts to collect her past-due child-support payments, she could do it herself.

So she did.

She walked to The Blade and plunked down \$8.43 for a classified advertisement that asked other parents who weren't getting support checks to call her.

"The phone, began ringing," Ms. Jensen said. "I felt it was an outrage that we had a child-support agency that wasn't doing what they were supposed to."

Since forming ACES, Ms. Jensen has parlayed the group into what she calls "the largest child-support advocacy organization in the U.S. . . ."

### ***Reported 17,000 members***

Ms. Jensen told U.S. Rep. Donald J. Pease, of Oberlin, O., in a letter last year that ACES had 17,000 members in 38 states, including 5,000 members and 50 county chapters in Ohio.

This month she estimated current ACES membership at 18,000.

But former ACES members and critics of Ms. Jensen say her organization is really a much smaller group with a paid membership in the hundreds.

Deborah McMaster, ACES chapter coordinator for Columbiana County, Ohio, said her chapter membership numbers "in the hundreds," but that she has only five dues-paying members in her county.

Ms. Jensen said she has difficulty accurately counting ACES members because of the computerized data-entry system she uses. She said she does not know how many people on her membership list are no longer members, nor how many are supposed to be voting members.

### ***Mailed 15,000 ballots***

She said ACES mailed 15,000 ballots to names and addresses on the membership list in April, 1988, for an annual election of the group's board of trustees.

Sixty-eight ballots were returned.

Former volunteers explain how Ms. Jensen works.

"She passes a sheet around [at meetings] to get your name and that's what she uses to boost her national membership," said Ardella Celeste, an early ACES supporter.

Ms. Jensen denied that she engaged in such practices.

But a former ACES chapter coordinator said Ms. Jensen trained her to do just that.

"She told me that people have no way to verify how much membership you have, so you overestimate," Debra Price said. "You create an illusion of being bigger than life and other people will follow you, like the Pied Piper."

Ms. Price ran an ACES chapter in Twilight, W. Va., but broke away from the organization over a disagreement with Ms. Jensen.

Ms. Jensen acknowledged that membership impresses public officials.

"One of the rules of organizing is that there is strength in numbers. We always told the members there's strength in numbers," she said. "You should always present a positive point of view on that as long as you are truthful."

### ***Bushes express interest***

The group's exposure this year attracted ACES' most prestigious members - George and Barbara Bush, who in an April letter commended its work and expressed interest in joining.

Even though Ms. Jensen said it's hard for her to know the exact number of ACES' members nation-wide, tax forms filed with the Internal Revenue Service shows that based on annual dues her organization's membership numbers in the hundreds.

The group listed 1988 "membership dues and assessments" of \$5,427 on last year's IRS form 990, which all nonprofit groups are required to file. Based on last year's \$10 annual membership dues, that would mean ACES had 542 paid members in 1988.

If all of the 17,000 members Ms. Jensen said ACES had last year would have paid their dues, the organization would have collected \$170,000.

Ms. Jensen said the discrepancy between the membership figures she hands out and the information on ACES' tax forms exists because some people pay only part of their dues or none at all if they can't afford it. But, she said, they are still considered members.

"There are many more people who don't pay dues than do," Ms. Jensen said. "That's OK. That's what we're all about."

Even though ACES is not strict on collecting dues, Ms. Jensen said she realizes that paid membership is important to foundations because it demonstrates self sufficiency.

And foundations are the real financial lifeblood of ACES.

Ms. Jensen last year secured \$150,919 from 11 foundations and two government grants ranging from \$500 given by the Youngstown Campaign for Human Development to a \$20,000 grant from the Rockefeller Foundation in New York, according to ACES' 1988 audit. The group got \$19,945 in grants in 1985, its first full operating year.

Three people formerly associated with ACES' Toledo office say Ms. Jensen was concerned last year about impressing a foundation representative about the number of people the organization served.

The former volunteer and two former employees - Diana Bobb, Ms. Graves and Margaret Wuwert said Ms. Jensen ordered them to inflate the amount of work ACES was involved with the day a Needmor Foundation representative visited the office in May, 1988.

Ms. Bobb said Ms. Jensen instructed her to put blank envelopes under stacks of addressed letters that were to be sent to people seeking information about child-support enforcement.

The Needmor Foundation gave ACES \$16,200 last year.

"We were told by Geraldine to make sure that we had plenty of envelopes out, just to make sure it looked like we had plenty of people who needed help," Ms. Bobb said.

#### ***Used blank envelopes***

Ms. Wuwert said Ms. Jensen told the volunteer's to use blank envelopes because they had discarded envelopes that had contained letters sent to ACES.

"She was upset because she had told them [volunteers] to save all the envelopes we had gotten since the TV shows to make it look [like] we were busy," Ms. Wuwert said. "She wanted them [foundation officials] to see the volume of mail that had come through."

The former ACES' office secretary said Ms. Jensen also crumpled up newspaper and placed it in the bottom of the incoming mail box in her office, spreading mail on top to make the pile look larger than it was.

Ms. Jensen denied the charges.

"I have more integrity than that and I don't have any need to do that. The Needmor fund has given us money for five years," she said. "We have a very good relationship with them and they know what we do is good."

Indeed, everyone who examines child-support enforcement acknowledges that serious problems existed and continue to plague the bureaucracy. Groups have fought to improve enforcement since 1979.

And critics and supporters alike have lauded Ms. Jensen for raising the consciousness level in this country concerning the problem of parents and children who aren't getting court-ordered support payments.

#### ***Turned deaf ear to criticism***

But former ACES members and supporters of Ms. Jensen and ACES say she and the organization have in some cases turned a deaf ear to criticism and change to the process hurting the very constituency she originally set out to help.

"This is probably the first thing in Geri's life where she ever shined," said Susan Speir, director of a California child-support advocacy group Single Parents United 'n Kids. "She's determined not to let someone get in her way and unfortunately, I believe it's to the detriment of the mothers."

Others, like Judy Hayes, of Tuscaloosa, Ala., look to Geraldine Jensen almost as a savior.

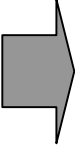
"She told us where to go, we were in the dark," said Ms. Hayes a woman who wasn't getting child support payments until she got help from Ms. Jensen and ACES. "I didn't know I had any rights. Geri is a pioneer. She did this first. She's done more to assist children than any other living person."

"I live in the Deep South where women and children have very few rights, and we have just forced our prosecutor to do the very first ex-tradition for nonpayment of child support," said the Alabama woman, hired by ACES as its first regional director.

ACES has succeeded, in large part, because of local and national media exposure.

### ***Television appearances***

Appearances on the Geraldo Rivera television show in April 1988, and another popular California talk show the day before inspired the flood of letters into the ACES office last year. Ms. Jensen said the group's office at the downtown YWCA was too small to hold the mail.

 "Her basic attitude was that if it had money in it, put it in this pile. And if it didn't have money - cash or checks in them - just pitch them," Gillman Bobb, an ACES volunteer at the time, said. His wife at the time, Diana, also worked at the ACES office in Toledo.

Mr. Bobb's wife, Diana, and Ms. Wuwert confirmed that the incident occurred.

Ms. Jensen said, however, that she told the volunteers to keep a list of names and addresses of everyone who wrote so that ACES could send them packets of information.

The order to throw letters out elicited protests from workers and volunteers and led Mr. and Mrs. Bobb to try to help some of the people who had written ACES.

Mr. Bobb said he and his wife called six women who had written particularly compelling letters and who had sent a significant amount of information about their cases.

### ***Refused to respond***

He said he asked Ms Jensen repeatedly to respond to those writers - women, he felt, who needed immediate attention.

Ms. Jensen refused.

"They wanted me to do more," she said. "They wanted me to call them all back because the letters were so sad. The decision was made respond the best we could with he resources we had."

Eventually, Ms. Jensen fired both of the Bobbs for making the telephone calls. She did so by mail.

"I am writing you to officially inform you that any and all affiliation with ACES is hereby revoked," she said in the letter. "This action is being taken due to your acting in ACES' name without authority or approval."

Ms. Jensen said the Bobbs were fired because they had made unauthorized long-distance telephone calls.

Former ACES volunteers and workers say Geraldine's decision not to personally answer any of the letters or have other ACES' growth and Ms. Jensen's own notoriety has prevented the organization from serving the people it was originally formed to help.

The ACES' president disagreed.

"The reality is that I care very much, that's why I do this," Ms. Jensen said. "The other reality is that this is now a national large organization and I don't do personal cases very often any more."

### ***10,000 packets mailed***

She said ACES mailed about 10,000 information packets to people who had written the office. She criticized the former Toledo ACES workers who have leveled charges against her, saying they are lying.

"I have enemies and people who don't like me. It's been impossible in the last five years to please everyone."

Geraldine Jensen's problems have spread far from Toledo, however.

The Cuyahoga County ACES chapter was also disbanded because of arguments between Ms. Jensen and her subordinates.

Ms. Jensen ordered chapter officers - just after they opened a satellite office in Cleveland - to present a live turkey to the Cuyahoga County prosecutor. It was a publicity stunt Ms. Jensen had used to good effect before, most notably when she rented a live turkey from a Leipsic, O., farmer to present to officials of the Ohio department of human services.

Cleveland ACES officials refused the order.

"Geri wanted things done her way and her way only," said Kathy McCoy, who at the time ran the Cleveland office. "We really had no input on anything. We were given directives that had nothing to do with our area."

She said she also disagreed with Ms. Jensen over a decision to use part of a \$55,800 grant from the Cleveland Community Foundation to pay for a videotape about ACES. The grant was designated for use only in Cuyahoga County, Ms. McCoy said, and the tape had nothing to do with the county. It was to be shown around the country.

### ***Not notified of closing***

Ms. Jensen said her board voted to close the Cleveland office and disband the county chapter. They did so without notifying the Cleveland staff or the Cleveland Community Foundation.

The foundation subsequently switched its grant to a new child-support advocacy group formed by Ms. McCoy - the Children's Support Rights Advocacy Group. That grant was recently renewed for a second year.

The experience in Cleveland, Ms. Jensen said, was a mistake and a lesson."

Goldie Alvis, director of the Cleveland Community Foundation, said that although she questions the tactics, she fully supports ACES' goals.

"It would seem to me a rational person wouldn't have so abruptly closed the office," Ms. Alvis said.

Despite the problems, even, Ms. Jensen's harshest critics say she is a gifted and motivational force in her cause.

"I think ACES is a terrific organization, that they serve a tremendous need, and I hope they succeed," said Ed Nicewicz, president of Fathers And Children for Equality, a Columbus-based group that promotes joint custody.

He has fought bitterly with Ms. Jensen over proposed state joint-custody laws.

And that is the arena where Geraldine Jensen works hardest.

### ***Lobbying effectively***

Even as she transformed ACES into a national network, she was lobbying effectively in Congress and statehouses around the country.

Last year, according to documents submitted by Ms. Jensen to the IRS, she and other ACES officials met in Washington with Lloyd Bentsen and Daniel Moynihan, members of the U.S. Senate, and with Marcy Kaptur, Thomas Downey, Frank McCloskey, and other members of the U.S. House of Representatives.

She testified in February, 1988, before a House subcommittee on public assistance and unemployment compensation.

Records released by Ms Jensen show that she and other ACES officials have lobbied in numerous states for various legislation since 1984.

But IRS tax forms for ACES submitted by Ms. Jensen for 1986 and 1987 state that she answered no to the question: "During the year, have you attempted to influence national, state, or local legislation, including any attempt to influence public opinion on a legislative matter or referendum?"

On the group's 1988 tax filing, which Ms. Jensen also signed, the answer to that question changed to "yes."

Ms. Jensen said she is not responsible for the answers on ACES tax forms. She said she asked Ronald Johnson, the organization's accountant, about the lobbying question and was told ACES need not report, on such activity since it hadn't spent money on lobbying efforts.

Mr. Johnson, a Toledo accountant with the firm of Pieper, Dickson and Johnson, refused to comment on the matter.

Tim Ray, a spokesman for the IRS who specializes in tax issues for charitable and nonprofit organizations, said it's doubtful an organization lobbied without spending any money and if that were the case the group should have answered "yes" to the question about attempts to influence legislation or public opinion on its annual tax form.

If no expenses were incurred, he said, the organization should have stated that on the-form.

### ***Does not understand change***

Mr. Ray said he also does not understand how ACES could attach an hourly cost for lobbying activities in 1988 after listing no costs for such work in each of the two previous years.

In 1986, ACES' records show, officials of the organization met with Ohio Senator Robert Ney for one hour to discuss "criminal nonsupport bill idea," and also testified before an Ohio House committee on income withholding for child-support payments.

The criminal nonsupport bill was enacted in 1986, making nonsupport a felony and giving the state the power to extradite ex-spouses who fail to pay child support.

ACES' records also show that its officials testified in 1986 before legislative committees in Georgia, Kentucky, Michigan, Texas, and West Virginia concerning proposed income withholding bills.

In 1987, ACES' records show extensive lobbying efforts in Ohio, Minnesota, Nevada and Texas.

Ms. Jensen acknowledged ACES has had problems, but she defended her personal style.

"You have hit every single bad thing that's happened in five years and you know all of them, there's nothing left," Ms. Jensen said.

### **ACES' Supporters**

Sen. Linda Furney (D., Toledo) is a primary supporter of ACES at the statehouse in Columbus. In 1987 and 1989, Geraldine Jensen joined a coalition formed by Senator Furney to influence the Legislature on spending issues for women and children.

Sen. Howard Metzenbaum (D., Ohio) last year supported Ms. Jensen's appointment to the Child Support Advisory Committee established by the Family Security Act.

Rep. Marcy Kaptur (D. Toledo) in Feb., 1988, introduced Geraldine Jensen in a Congressional subcommittee hearing on the federal child support enforcement program lauding her lobbying efforts.

Dagmar Celeste, wife of Governor Celeste, was an ACES' national trustee from 1986 to 1988, although she never attended a board meeting. About Ms. Jensen: "I don't know who Geraldine Jensen is. I wouldn't know her if I saw her."

Lucas County Commissioner Sandy Isenberg helped Ms. Jensen obtain \$19,350 in grants for ACES from the Lucas County Children's trust fund.