

Acceptance Speech by Children's Law Center

Appellate Director, Melissa Colangelo

National Association of Counsel for Children

Outstanding Legal Advocate of 2025

August 12, 2025

What a true honor, NACC. Thank you so much for this recognition and for shining a light on the power and potential of appellate advocacy.

To my family: through late nights, emotional days, and *all* the deadlines your support, humor, and patience – it's everything, you keep me going.

To everyone at Children's Law Center in DC, one more thanks, especially to:

- our CEO Judith Sandalow,
- our Chief Legal Officer, my supervisor, & your past NACC president LaShanda Adams, and
- our Appellate team – Jessica Sullivan, Thomas Carpenter, Rollie Goss, & our 2nd to none Deputy Katherine Piggott-Tooke – this team is brilliant, tireless, it's got grit and grace, & I'm so proud to do this work together.

And I thank our clients for trusting us, teaching us, & reminding us what true courage looks like.

Okay, those who know me aren't surprised I've mentioned being a team – it's something I'm always talking about; I'm even guilty

of ending emails or meetings with “go team.” But there’s one thing I actually love even more than a team and that’s an UNDERDOG team. I’ve always loved that underdogs show us no one knows the outcome until the game is played; and they don’t win because it’s easy, they win because they refuse to give up.

And I know I’m not alone in drawing inspiration from these stories, just look at those we’ve heard today and yesterday, plus they’re some of our collective best — the American Revolution, Rosa Parks and Ruby Bridges, the Resistance in Star Wars, Rocky, the Mighty Ducks. Right? Underdogs all. They don’t start with power, privilege, or a perfect record of wins; yet they show people what’s possible with determination, energy, and unity.

Now, I’ve been thinking about things that connect all of us different advocates here, and maybe one is that we are underdogs representing incredible underdogs, *especially* in this moment. I mean we’ve *always* faced complex, tiring work; the entire system continues to struggle w/problematic origins; it’s a field that can be challenging on the best of days and these are not the best of days. Just fighting for the basic dignity and humanity our clients deserve like any other litigant, that can now appear almost radical. And w/foundational legal principles more uncertain than ever, it can seem like justice isn’t just delayed, it’s disappearing.

But there’s power in being an underdog. We don’t rely on status or business as usual — we’re driven by purpose. Underdogs do the work. We put on evidence b/c it’s an adversarial system even when it feels like the wild west sometimes; we make the argument for family integrity when that’s best for our clients,

even if everyone else has already dismissed a parent or kin caregiver; and we recognize that family law is constitutional law and the stakes are simply too great to cut corners or fall back on assumptions. And like other underdogs, we may be underestimated, but we know that through collective action, we're greater than the sum of our parts – as evidenced by the people in this room sharing new strategies and building future victories together.

So I urge you to jot down a phrase or person that reminds you to channel and champion the underdog spirit next time you need it– you could think of Churchill's never never give in, Nelson Mandela's quote it always seems impossible until it's done, Maya Angelou repeating still I rise, Arya Stark saying not today, or even Ted Lasso's Believe.

Because if we're seen as underdogs with the odds stacked against us, okay. Just don't make the mistake of counting us out. In the long run, betting on the hard work and hope of these underdogs, that's one of the smartest things anyone could do.

Go team, go underdogs, thank you.