



CASA of franklin county
Court Appointed Special Advocates

COLUMBUS, OHIO

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Lending a Voice

Young volunteer program provides positive role models and support for children in need

By Erin Norris



Local CASA volunteers Meredith Udolph and Caleb Buggs.

Photo by Chris Casella

For the thousands of abused and neglected children that become wards of the state each year, stability is not a familiar concept. All too often, they are moved from unsafe homes into an



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overburdened legal system, where specialized, individual attention is simply unavailable. The conditions of foster and group homes have certainly improved over time, but the stress and unfamiliarity of temporary housing still yields unsettling statistics. About 40 percent of foster children

drop out of high school, while an estimated 50 percent of female foster children become pregnant by the age of 19. Sadly, long-term solutions for displaced children are limited, but a local non-profit aspires to change that, one kid at a time.

The Court-Appointed Special Advocates Association (CASA) is a national organization devoted to representing abused and neglected children by focusing on what they need most - individual attention. Each case is handled by a Special Advocate, or a Guardian Ad Litem (GAL), a volunteer who is specially trained by CASA to legally represent children in some of the most severe cases of abuse, neglect or domestic violence. Volunteers often have separate careers in law or social services and undergo specialized training and certification through the program. In order to ensure that each child receives the best possible legal representation, GALs are limited to just two cases at a time. Typically they remain on these cases until the children they represent are placed in safe, permanent homes. This consistency is essential in fostering personal, trusting relationships that not only serve the legal interests of the children, but provide them with the stability they need in order to succeed.

Meredith Udolph is a local court-appointed CASA/GAL. In addition to her career as a paralegal, she has worked with the organization for nearly two years and has handled three cases. Like all GALs, her certification required 40 hours of accredited pre-service training, as well as 12 hours of continued education. Rather than treating every case with the same legal course, she provides a personal service for each child she works with, listening to their wishes and achieving them to the best of her ability. "I speak with each child to learn how they have been affected by the incident that has brought the case to CASA and [Franklin County Children's Services] and ultimately learn their wishes as to permanent placement." She adds that often the hopes of the children she represents are incongruous with the recommendations of CASA and Children's Services - such as returning them to homes and caretakers that have been deemed unfit. In those cases, she works closely with the child to find the best long-term solution. If a child is to be returned to his or her original caretaker or parent, they must abide by strict requirements, or "case objectives," set by CASA and Children's Services. Each set of case objectives is specific, but often they include maintaining independent housing and employment, attending drug screenings, and seeking drug/alcohol rehabilitation.

Aside from working through the often lengthy legal proceedings, which can last several months, GALs provide more personal services. In one touching testimonial, a young girl described her relationship with her appointed CASA volunteer, saying, "Stephanie and I did lots of things together, but my favorite was bowling. We also had picnics and went to the library. She would talk to me on the phone whenever I needed her, and she made sure I got another diary. Stephanie made me a CD of music we sang to in the car, and I still have it."

CASA offers a wide range of volunteer opportunities, all of which serve a unique purpose. Caleb Buggs has served for three years on the Diversity Team, a volunteer group that "recruits and retains a diversity of volunteers for CASA leadership and advocacy, representative of the cultural and ethnic backgrounds of abused and neglected children in Franklin County." An ethnically diverse group of



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volunteers is preferable, as it allows children to be paired with positive role models and leaders that they can relate to and trust, thus increasing their chances of success and well-being. Buggs and his fellow volunteers have a variety of responsibilities, including "helping with the wording of a newspaper recruitment ad, providing contact names at local churches, clubs and organizations where a CASA representative can speak, or becoming a CASA presenter to speak on behalf of the

organization." Buggs and other members of the Diversity Team often have specific objectives for recruitment. "My role on the Diversity Team is crucial in which our initiative is to target African

American male business professionals," he explained. "The idea is to increase diversity of our pool of Guardian Ad Litem Court Appointed Advocates that will work on the child's behalf. Because the majority of our children are African-American, our ideal placement would be influential African American male role models that care and are empowered to fill the role."

Spending a good deal of time with abused and neglected children may seem like grim work, but Udolph insists her overall experience has been extraordinarily rewarding. "All the kids I have been involved with through CASA have made an impact on me," she said adding, "There was one case recently where the little girl, she was two the time, became quite attached to me. I was saying goodbye at the end of one of my visits, and she came to give me a hug. She then wrapped her arms around my neck and lifted her feet, so that I was holding her. She snuggled into me as if she had done it a million times before and then said, 'I want to go to your house!' It nearly melted my heart!"

If CASA's objective to lend a voice to disadvantaged children isn't exceptional enough, the agency's appreciation of its volunteers certainly is. "I think what sets CASA apart from other service-based agencies is the staff," Udolph remarked. "Not only do they serve the needs of so many children, but they are very supportive to the volunteers." Buggs also praised the organization, saying, "The best impression I have had during my time with CASA has been the dedication of the employees. Their jobs are challenging and each of them has been passionate about what they do."

CASA will hold its 10th annual "Speak Up For Children" breakfast on Tuesday, October 5th. The event is free and runs from 7:30 a.m. to 8:30 a.m., with registration beginning at 7 a.m. in the Hyatt Regency Ballroom (350 N High St.). The objective of the event is to show appreciation for current volunteers and staff members, and to provide information for those wishing to donate their time and resources to the organization. If interested, please call the CASA of Franklin County office at 614-462-7450.

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