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CASA Volunteers: A Consistent Connection for Children in Foster Care

By Lou Fancher



CASA volunteers are appointed by judges and are a powerful voice for abused and neglected children in an overburdened child welfare system. CASA of Contra Costa County currently has over 90 youth waiting for a CASA volunteer. Photo provided

85 percent of the volunteers are women, 15 percent men. Because many of the boys in the program have never had a strong male presence in their lives, the desire for male volunteers is critical.

But that doesn't mean Mead sugarcoats the immense commitment required or the scrupulous selection process.

"We put our volunteers through intense screening. We have a high responsibility of never putting our vulnerable kids into any danger," he says.

After the initial application and screening, CASA volunteers complete a 40-hour training program before selecting a case from files chosen to match their interests and capabilities. They are expected to serve a minimum of two years or until a case is closed, whichever comes first. A 15-20 hour monthly commitment includes weekly visits with the child, submitting logs and court reports, consulting with staff and attending court hearings.

"You are a friend to the child, but your primary role is to represent the child as an officer of the court," Mead says. "You're not the 911-gotta-fix-it service: you're there to be the objective, concise voice of the child."

But listen to the stories of three Lamorinda volunteers and behind their intellect, you will recognize another tone: the sound of compassion.

Sue Woolwine of Orinda became a CASA 21 years ago, after "lofting" her own children. "I came across a newspaper article, called CASA and signed up. Needless to say, it has been a good fit," she says.

Woolwine has completed 12 cases and is currently serving an 8-year-old girl. As a former teacher and with the ability to speak Spanish, she has special tools and enjoys helping older children who are about to "age out" of the system. (With the passage of AB 12 - a bill extending social support services for out-of-home children to the age of 21 - aging out no longer means a cut-off at 18.) She has learned to live with the long, slow dependency process and is continually surprised by the amount of change the children endure.

"At a time when these kids so desperately need stability, constancy and predictability, any change can be a detriment. The CASA is often the one constant in the child's life," she says.

Instead of describing what the children receive from her, she says they have given her unquantifiable inspiration and have taught her resilience.

Lafayette resident Jane Hufft remembers standing in a high school parking lot, listening to a frightened, angry teenager screaming. "She was on the streets at age 18 (before AB 12) and had no way to finish high school," Hufft recalls. Years later, while a principal at Morello Park Elementary in Martinez, a CASA visited a child at the school. Impressed, Hufft vowed to enlist when she retired.

In 2009, she completed her training and chose her first child. "You get a stack of kids to read about, and one file speaks to you," she claims. Hufft's sentences tend to end with exclamation marks: it's easy to imagine her charisma is a magnet for kids in need of responsive, responsible adults.

Hufft says she sees or hears about parents in jail, on the streets, who are severely mentally ill or have abandoned their children, or who just have no ability to meet the demands of raising a child. "Homeless adults are

An acronym is rarely described as gloriously poetic and incidentally profound, but CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocates), is both. "Casa" is the Spanish word for home, for family dwelling: a safe, secure, sturdy, long-lasting refuge. And CASA volunteers are living embodiments of the exact same qualities. In the life of an abused, abandoned or temporarily/permanently without-parents child, they are hope's preservers.

CASA volunteers serve as advocates for children placed in the care of a Juvenile Dependency Court. Appointed by a judge, they become the child's voice - meeting with the child and all individuals involved in the child's case, reviewing records and applicable laws, and advocating with compassion and objectivity on the child's behalf.

In Contra Costa County, 140 volunteers strive to fill the flanks of Executive Director Charlie Mead's program. Serving approximately 150 children per year - just 10 percent of the county's 1,300 children; with 90 CASA-approved cases on the wait list - recruiting is always on his mind.

"We train about 50-60 volunteers per year, and yes," he says, anticipating a question, "we're always looking for more men to be involved."

Throughout the 950 programs nationwide, Mead says

hard pressed to be good parents. Some people are just plain cruel to kids, period," she admits, bluntly. But soon after, she's listing CASA skills sets: ability to listen, commitment, knowledge, willingness to learn, patience, perseverance and good cheer! Oh, and one more thing. It helps to stay current on the coolest drinks at coffee shops if your child is 17 or older. Volunteers are not required to spend money, but Mead says many CASA's prefer to share a simple meal or activity when meeting with their children.

Susan Casey learned about CASA and began her training while studying for the Bar exam in 2005. The Lafayette resident's first case, "closed" after six years, is ongoing. Today, she continues to mentor the now 20-year-old "child" who first jumped from a case file, as if to say, "I'm yours!"

"Every case is different and brings forward new issues. You have to be willing to learn new things," she says, adding, "It also helps if you like ice cream."

Despite what she calls "the horrible atrocities perpetrated on (the) children," she admires their "enormous capacity to love." Beyond raising and caring for her family, she says becoming a CASA has been "daunting, but so worthwhile."

Notably, none of them offer the classic volunteer's lament: "It was so much more work than I expected!" Instead, they speak with gratitude and determination - in the objective, compassionate language of CASA.

To learn more about becoming a CASA volunteer, visit www.cccocasa.org.

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