

volunteer voice

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2007 G.F. Bettineski Child Advocate of the Year
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It is not lost on me that in order for me to receive National CASA's Advocate of the Year award, there had to be children who were abused. That's a very poignant situation, and it affects me greatly. I have a list I keep with me of 35 names: the names of the children I've had the privilege of representing over the past 19 years.

One young girl on the list I'll call Anna. Hers was a very difficult sexual abuse case. I won't go into the horrific details. But this was a girl who I anticipated would not live out the year. I was almost positive she would take her own life. It was a struggle for her, but she survived. I became her volunteer when she was 8 years old and concluded when she emancipated two years ago. This young woman, now 22, stood proudly with me at an Orange County celebration event and, with great confidence, told the story of how much she had gained through her involvement with the CASA program.

When I help train new CASA volunteers, I come to the last session to talk about what volunteer advocacy is really going to be like. It's a motivational talk, and I always ask the new volunteers to write out on an index card the reason they signed up in the first place. I did the same, and I still refer to it all these years later. Mine reads, "If nothing else, I want a child to know that for a short time someone cared for them and was willing to stand up for them."

Many people ask me, "What percentage of children are you really able to help?" I always answer—100%. I tell them I'm not responsible for changing a child's life, although that may happen. It is my privilege, however, to come alongside a child at a time when they are the most vulnerable and give them hope.

Why have I remained a CASA volunteer for 19 years? It's part of my overall value system; I believe I should reach out to those who have no voice. Also, I've decided at this phase of my life to use my time, money and energy to help children. I originally came to CASA of Orange County as the result of a letter I received from them about a new sexual abuse advocacy program they were starting. It was an innovative idea at

the time to bring in a whole team of professionals to support the child in one visit—to avoid making the child repeat again and again the trauma they've been through. I was the first graduate and took the first case.

To come back to my list: Another little girl I'll call Kathy. One day I asked, "How's my friend Kathy?" Many times before she'd answered, "Kathy is just fine." This time, though, she said, "I'm not Kathy." That startled me. I questioned her a bit further. She told me a story about a girl named Lisa. I slowly realized Lisa was part of her imagination. So I spoke to a psychologist recommended by my CASA program, who suggested we might be dealing with multiple personality disorder. All of us

were skeptical because it's very unusual to discover this in a child of 8. It turns out she had been ritualistically abused and had developed 16 personalities; to escape the pain, she had to become someone else. She got psychiatric help, and she was able to dissolve many of these personalities. When her case closed, Kathy was doing extremely well in therapy. The discovery of this problem and her subsequent treatment probably saved her from an adult life plagued by mental illness.

These stories are multiplied over and over. Everyone who is an advocate understands that we are not the heroes. The heroes are the hundreds and thousands of children who have been abused, abandoned and neglected. And we have the privilege to work with these incredible young people. As

I accepted my award at the National CASA Conference in Orlando, I had my list of precious names. And I asked the hundreds of volunteers from all over the country to stand as I closed. When I gave the signal, every one of them spoke aloud the name of a child they had served. The murmuring waves of the names of the heroes we all represent wash over me to this day. 🏠

