

Giving Children a Voice

A retired State Farm couple serves as court advocates for children who have been neglected, abused or put into foster care.

Pam Dunlap meets with a special elementary-school-age child every Wednesday after school. Sometimes they go to McDonald's ... or to a softball game ... or to see the elephant seals along the California coast. Occasionally they work on homework. But mostly they talk.

A passerby might assume this is Pam's grandchild, but that's not the case. In many ways, the retired State Farm® agent serves as this child's protector and problem solver.

As a volunteer for the Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) Program, Pam works with kids who have been neglected, abused or put into foster care.

CASA exists to provide advocates for children who have been removed from their homes by court order and placed under the care of the courts. CASA volunteers like Pam and her husband, Roy, are trained to become the voice of a child, acting on his or her behalf as an officer of the court.



"It's important to become buddies to these kids and teach them things and provide whatever kind of support they need," said Pam, who was an agent in Simi Valley, Calif., for 22 years. She and Roy, who was an agent in Los Angeles and retired as an Agency manager, now live in the Central California coastal town of Arroyo Grande. Both have children and grandchildren of their own.

A constant presence

As child advocates, Pam and Roy get involved in every aspect of the child's life.

"I talk with parents, teachers, social workers, doctors, attorneys, dentists, other family members and their attorneys," said Pam, a nine-year advocate. "Sometimes we have team decision-making meetings where we sit down with all involved and decide what to do.

"If we see something not going right, we try to set it straight," she added. "I have a legal obligation to do the best job I can. The goal is to figure out what's in the best interest of the child up to and including permanent placement – either reuniting them with parents or adoption."

CASA volunteers – with some limitations due to liability issues – are able to take a child on outings, away from the formal courtroom and impersonal office environment, to get to know them better.

But there are boundaries. CASA volunteers must keep their lives separate from a case. They cannot bring a child into their own home or include them in their own family activities. When the case is over, so is the relationship.

Rewarding and worthwhile

The cases can be tough. Children may have parents with drug, alcohol or mental problems. Some children have

been physically, mentally or sexually abused.

For Roy, a seven-year advocate who has also volunteered as a Big Brother, CASA work is consuming but welcome. "A lot more is expected of you, and much more of your time," he said. "I get a real good feeling about being a volunteer for CASA."

For both Pam and Roy, the reward is to see everyone in a family grow from the experience – parents reunited with their children after learning how to be the best parent they can be.

Roy recalled one child, whose case had come to a happy conclusion, who asked to address the court. This child expressed to the entire courtroom a heartfelt gratitude for Roy's kindness and help throughout what had certainly been a very painful and personal process. There were no dry eyes left in that courtroom.

As a CASA volunteer, Pam says she draws deeply on her experience as a former agent.

"I personally think CASA is a great fit for State Farm associates," she said. "In our industry, we are trained to solve problems and investigate. We've learned how to talk to people and get information." And, one might argue, part of the State Farm culture that often becomes ingrained in associates is caring about others and developing deep yet professional relationships that have a lasting effect.

For those not suited for the court advocate role, there are many other ways to volunteer for this national organization (also called Guardian ad Litum in some states), including as board members, office workers, project team members and fundraisers.

"In my mind, it's natural for us insurance types to become CASA volunteers," Pam said. "We are taking care of a client, and here at CASA, your client is the child, and it's your job to determine what's best for that child."

When not busy with their CASA duties, Roy gets three rounds of golf in every week, and Pam enjoys working with the 500-plus plants in her garden. Pam joked that good gardeners make lousy housekeepers, but Roy countered her with, "But good gardeners make great CASA volunteers!" 🍷

Pam and Roy Dunlap

Ages:

Pam, 63; Roy, 80

Retired as: agent and Agency manager

Retired in:

2001 and 1994

Years of service:

22 and 38

Now residing in:

Arroyo Grande, Calif.

Family: Roy had two sons and one daughter.

Steven, who lives in Idaho, is Roy's only remaining child. His daughter Shari died in 2002, and his son Rick, who passed away in 2006, was a State Farm agent in California for seven years. Roy has nine grandchildren and four great grandchildren.

Pam has one son, Agent Greg Johnson in Santee, Calif. He and his wife Jeannie have four children.

More on CASA

Court Appointed Special Advocates is the creation of a judge in Washington state. He was frustrated by not having enough background information on children whose cases he was handling. Through this national organization volunteers are appointed to a case and become the voice of a neglected or abused child, following at least 30 hours of training. Visit casaforchildren.org to learn more.