



Make the Dream a Reality for The Children

By Judge Glenda A. Hatchett

Although Dr. King is no longer with us, his spirit and dream live on.

On January 17, 2011, we will mark the 25th anniversary of the Martin Luther King, Jr. federal holiday. It is a milestone that provides us with an opportunity to honor his legacy.

The Martin Luther King, Jr. federal holiday is also recognized as a national day of service. A time when we can impact our communities the most and transform Dr. King's life and teachings into community action that helps solve social problems.

As we embark on this 17th annual Martin Luther King, Jr. Day of Service, please take time to reflect on how we can make his dream a reality for African American children in foster care.

Each year, according to a U.S. Department of Health and Human Services report on adoption and foster care, more than 450,000 children enter the foster care system in the United States. Today in America over 152,000 African American children are in foster care. They represent nearly one-third of all children in foster care, where more than 50 percent are boys.

Dr. King once said that "life's most persistent and urgent question is: What are you doing for others?" How can we continue to make the dream a reality for African American children in foster care?

One way that we can start is by becoming involved with the National Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) Association, a nonprofit organization that I support because it has been proven to work for children in foster care.

CASA is a national network of trained community volunteers who are appointed by judges to watch over and advocate for the safety and wellbeing of abused and neglected children. It fulfills society's most sacred obligation, by making sure a qualified, compassionate adult will fight for and protect a child's best interest when and where it matters most. Research shows children with a caring CASA volunteer by their sides are significantly more likely to find safe, permanent homes. Less than 10 percent of children who have had a CASA volunteer return to the foster care system.

Today, more than 70,000 CASA volunteers serve more than 230,000 abused and neglected children through 1,055 program offices across the U.S. However, only 12 percent of these volunteers are African American.

As Georgia's first African American Chief Presiding Judge and head of one of the largest juvenile court systems in the country, I saw countless children from all walks of life enter and exit the foster care system.

These children are more than just statistics, they are our future, and need someone to be that constant anchor in their lives. Our children need to do more than simply survive – they need to thrive and be given the tools to do so.

Become a CASA volunteer today and help a child in need. A CASA volunteer must be at least 21 years of age and successfully pass a background check; participate in an in-depth 30-hour volunteer training class; communicate effectively both verbally and in writing; and commit to staying with a case until the child finds a safe, permanent home.

As Martin Luther King Jr. once said, “everybody can be great ... because anybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree or make your subject and verb agree to serve. You only need a heart full of grace and a soul generated by love.”

For more information about National CASA or the local CASA program in your area, call 1-800-628-3233 or visit online at www.CASAforchildren.org.

Judge Glenda A. Hatchett is a nationally recognized authority on juvenile issues and serves as a national spokesperson for the National CASA Association. The best-selling author of Say What You Mean and Mean What You Say! released her second book, Dare to Take Charge in September 2010.