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Cover Story

## Working with Impoverished Children and Families in the Child Welfare System

By Lisette Austin

Facts about poverty in the United States are stark. According to the Stanford Center for the Study of Poverty and Inequality, America is exceptionally unequal when it comes to income—with 1% of the population controlling 23.5% of all the country’s income. The United States ranks third among first-world countries in the level of income inequality. The US poverty rate is at 15.8%; only one advanced economy has a higher relative poverty rate—Mexico. Roughly 750,000 Americans are homeless on any given night, with one in five of those being chronically homeless. Nearly 22% of all American children are in poverty, a child poverty rate second only to that of Mexico. In 2007, 81 million American children under 18 years old were without health insurance.



What defines poverty? The US government annually publishes the *Federal Poverty Level Guidelines*. In 2011, the poverty line for a family of three is listed as a total family income of up to \$18,530 per year, or \$1,544 per month. However, this official guideline does not capture the full picture.

Monica Bogucki, a staff attorney with the Legal Aid Society of Minneapolis who has specialized in providing legal advice to youth for over 20 years, outlines a wider definition of poverty. In a recent [National CASA podcast](#), she identifies three levels: near poverty, poverty (federal poverty guideline level) and extreme poverty. Families in extreme poverty would have an income closer to one half of the federal guidelines—around \$9,265 a year. Bogucki explains that those in the near-poverty category are typically what people call the “working poor”—living just slightly above the poverty line.

“About 20% of children under the age of 6 live in poverty,” says Bogucki. “But if you put the two categories of near poverty and poverty together, it’s now 43% of all children.”

With the recent economic downturn, the number of people living in poverty is increasing.

“There is a new category often referred to as the ‘newly poor,’” says Bogucki. “These are



families who have never really lived in poverty, but now they are homeless or have lost nearly half their income. It's hard to get statistics on this group because it is so new.”

### Poverty and Child Abuse

The impact of poverty on children and families can be devastating. Ongoing poverty weakens parents' and caregivers' ability to cope with the inevitable demands and stress of day-to-day life. Economic hardship can mean difficulty finding safe housing, childcare, medical treatment, food and clothing. It can also lead to increased depression, family conflict, substance abuse and isolation—all of which can fuel child abuse and neglect. The federal government's *Fourth National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS-4)* recently reported that children in families struggling with poverty are three times more likely to be abused and seven times more likely to be neglected.

Unlike previous NIS study cycles, the NIS-4 also found higher rates of abuse among African American children. However, further analysis shows that this difference in maltreatment rates is strongly related to the higher number of African American children and families living in poverty. In the end, poverty stands out as the strongest risk factor for child abuse and neglect in the United States.



Recognition of the intersection of poverty and the child welfare system is nothing new. The intention of federal child welfare policy over the last 100 years has been to not remove children from their homes simply “for reasons of poverty.” Unfortunately, it is still very prevalent for poor families to be labeled as neglectful and to have their children removed, sometimes for reasons that could be solved through basic financial support and connection to community resources.

With the economic downturn, many fear this trend will increase.

“With all of the cuts on the local, state and federal level, we will continue to see a majority of children removed because families aren't able to provide what kids need physically, nutritionally and medically,” says Chanin B. Kelly-Rae, National CASA's senior director for inclusion and equity. “We'll see the reverberation of those cuts in the coming years. Short term, a lot more kids and families are at risk of entering the child welfare system. It frightens me to think about the long-term prospect for communities of color that are already vulnerable and struggling to get a footing after centuries of discrimination and inequity.”

### Disparate Outcomes

Once in the child welfare system, impoverished children and families face far worse outcomes when compared to those families with more financial and social support. Research studies have

linked family poverty with more out-of-home placements, lower probability of family reunification and a higher chance of a return to substitute care even if reunification with the family does happen. Impoverished caregivers frequently have a harder time meeting court-established requirements due to financial barriers. It can also be difficult for families in poverty to retain legal services, especially after losing a child welfare court case. Again, the recent economic downturn only exacerbates this disparity, with more states forced to cut budgets that might normally provide assistance to families navigating the child welfare system.

Impoverished families also face biases from child welfare workers and service providers.

“One of the myths about people living in poverty is that they are poor because they choose to be,” says Monica Bogucki. “The families and children that I work with do not want to be on assistance, they want to work and move ahead with their goals.”

Far too often, service providers look at economically disadvantaged people through a narrow lens, missing their strengths, resiliency and resourcefulness.

“Things can get misinterpreted when dealing with socioeconomic issues,” says Bogucki. “Families in the system are sometimes labeled as ‘non-cooperative,’ when the underlying issue actually is that they simply don’t have the resources to carry out what is asked of them. Sometimes they are too embarrassed to admit they don’t have those resources.”

### **Awareness and Education Are Key**

CASA volunteers who work with impoverished families and children can start by educating themselves about what it means to live in poverty and then examine their own biases and negative attitudes toward poor people.

“Self-awareness is key,” says Danielle Morrison, program director of CASA of Allegheny County in Pennsylvania. She has made it a priority to provide staff and advocate training about poverty issues. “It’s about knowing who we are, how we feel about ourselves and how we think about others. It’s about knowing how issues of poverty tug at our value systems.”

The *Bridges Out of Poverty* training is one way to become educated about the issues surrounding people living in poverty in our country. The training is based on the book *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* by Ruby K. Payne, PhD. Her follow-up book, *Bridges Out of Poverty*, serves as the training manual in her workshops for service providers. The training focuses on relationship building, mentoring, program redesign and community collaboration.



Tracy Evans, National CASA’s diversity manager, highly recommends the training. She was impressed with the use of case studies as well as the examination of the larger political and social issues that surround poverty.

“The training shapes the way you think about poverty and breaks down stereotypes that you may have had about folks who are impoverished in the foster care system,” says Evans. “If parents can’t feed their children three times a day, it doesn’t necessarily mean they are willfully neglectful or abusive. Removing a child from an impoverished family can on the surface seem like a huge benefit to the child, but that’s not always the case.”

Chanin Kelly-Rae also stresses that it is far too easy to look at poor families through a negative lens. “The typical CASA advocate is someone who comes from an experience of being middle class,” she says. “It’s easy to think that impoverished families don’t have a right to raise their children because they can’t provide a middle class lifestyle. However, a bigger house in the best neighborhood does not make a better parent.”



### Identifying Strengths and Resources

When working with families and children who are in the child welfare system primarily for reasons related to poverty, CASA volunteers can actively work to identify and support family strengths. The goal is to then help the family access the resources they need to become better providers for their children.

“It’s about stepping into the shoes of the family and looking at what basic needs the family has been able to meet,” says Monica Bogucki. “See what it is they do have, and then try to build on that base.”

In her National CASA podcast, Bogucki describes several steps to take when initially working with impoverished families. The first is to create a chart of current family resources.

“List every family member in the household and what benefit programs they currently access,” Bogucki says. She then suggests making a list of what the family needs and steps to address those needs.

“I often see families who don’t have any transportation,” she offers as an example. “One of things you can do is ask the court to order a bus pass, and that helps to extend the cash available to the household.”

Bogucki also recommends developing a list of local emergency resources such as food banks, counseling, homeless shelters and places that provide free or inexpensive clothing.

“The most difficult thing about living in poverty is that it can be very crisis-driven,” Bogucki says. “If this kind of list is available, it can help reduce stress because resources are already identified.”

Chanin Kelly-Rae adds a few more suggestions to the list. “CASA volunteers can also work to make sure the court system is helping families stay engaged and connected in their own communities,” she says. “Look at local kinship care and kinship placements so children can stay with friends, go to the same school and stay with the supportive team of people they know they can depend on.”

### **Agents of Change**

The issue of poverty and how it intersects with the child welfare system is a large one that requires change on multiple levels.

“It’s no small challenge to deal with the systemic issues that keep families in poverty,” says Tracy Evans. “As long as poverty exists, we’ll have children and families who enter our circle of care under duress and with a great need for support, understanding and advocacy.” She stresses that change needs to happen at individual, organizational and community levels. “CASA advocates are the greatest strength for children in care because we hit at so many levels.”

Danielle Morrison agrees wholeheartedly.

“CASA volunteers are change agents,” she says. “We can help effect sustainable change around the issue of poverty.” She also believes strongly in recruiting volunteers from lower socioeconomic levels since they know first hand what the challenges are and what is needed to meet those challenges. “People from every walk of life have the potential to be an advocate and an agent of change.”

In the end, it is the families and children themselves who will teach advocates what they need to know to help make a difference.

“I have learned much about poverty issues through my clients and what they graciously share with me,” reflects Bogucki. “It has been a generous gift, and I’m very thankful. I am humbled by my clients and their tremendous strengths.”



## Voices & Viewpoints

### Volunteer Voice

#### Foster Care Is Not Who You Are—It Is Merely Where You Came From

Frank West  
2011 G.F. Bettineski Child Advocate of the Year  
CASA of Grant County, Inc.  
Marion, IN



My wife Marci and I joke that my selection as volunteer of the year had to be a miracle because it made me speechless. I'm a veteran of the Marine Corps who has witnessed a great deal, including the births of my four children. But getting that phone call literally caused me to shake. I do not believe that my actions were extraordinary compared to other volunteers. But I truly appreciate the honor.

I had a very harsh childhood. When I went through my initial interview to become a volunteer, they asked me, "Have you ever been exposed to physical abuse, sexual abuse or neglect?" I said "Yes." They said, "Well, which one?" And I said, "All of them." I was never in the child welfare system, but I should have been.

I survived that childhood and went on to be blessed with a good family and career. Being a volunteer allows me to show young people that you really *can* choose a path different from those you've been exposed to. For the most part, we're products of our environment and of our DNA. Unless we choose to make some drastic choices, there's a good chance we'll repeat the patterns of our parents and grandparents. But the cycle *can* be broken.

As a Marine, I fought so someone else could have a better way of life. As a CASA volunteer, I have the same mission. We scatter seeds of hope. A lot of these kids are surrounded by negative voices. They hear that they'll never turn out to *be* anything. But we can show children that they can become more than what is spoken about them. For example, I was told in high school that I wasn't college material. But I used my GI Bill benefits and squeezed four years into six years part time, ending up with a 3.8 GPA. So I tell young people, "Foster care is not *who you are*, it's merely *where you came from*."

The teenager I'm serving as a CASA volunteer—let's call her Lucy—is a bright girl. But one of the first things she said to me was, "I think I'm mentally retarded." I asked her why she thought that. "Because my grades are poor." She was a senior but had twice failed the test necessary for graduation. So I petitioned the court, and we got a full cognitive workup done. It proved what I thought—she's of solidly average intelligence.

After we did the testing, the school stated that Lucy didn't score low enough to qualify for special education. But they gave her full advantage of the resource room. We found that if she took her history test on her own, she scored 40%; but when it was read to her, she scored 80%. So the school allowed her to have her tests read to her from then on. This past spring, she graduated on time. It would not have happened without a CASA volunteer on the case.

How do I describe CASA work to people who don't know about it? I explain that kids find themselves in a situation that they didn't put themselves in. Someone has not done their job taking care of them. The state has gotten involved and removed the children from the harmful situation, which is the right thing to do. Parents, social workers and attorneys can all speak for themselves, but the child may not have a voice in court—someone who speaks to their best interests. As a CASA volunteer, you get to know the children and become that voice.

I usually ask potential volunteers, "Have you ever thought about being a foster parent?" Most will usually say yes. Then I explain that while that level of commitment may not be feasible for you or your family, you *can* be a CASA volunteer. You can do many of the same things but without having the children under your roof. It's not a full-time job—it's something you can do in a few hours a month as a volunteer and make an impact. All you need is to have a good heart and to do your work with diligence.

My wonderful, loving wife and our four children make possible my success as a volunteer by sacrificing some time with me. But I feel comfortable because they understand it's to help someone else have a better life. Young people are our future, and our dreams for a better tomorrow rest in their hands.



## From the CEO

### A Life Cut Short

Michael S. Piraino  
National CASA CEO

As I write this, it is 4:30 a.m. in Seattle and I am on my way to New York to be interviewed by Diane Sawyer. The interview is for an upcoming special on the issue of overmedication of foster youth—something that is of great concern to me and to many of our volunteers. But that’s not what is on my mind this morning.

A few days ago, I picked up the *New York Times* and saw this headline: “A Bleak Life, Cut Short at 4.” I read through the story—yet another episode of a child whose situation was known to CPS, who nonetheless died a tragic and unthinkable death. I took it all in with a sickening sense of familiarity.



As often happens following a tragedy like this, there will be the rush to lay blame, to reset procedures and maybe even to create a new law or two. But what struck me about the article is not that one part of the system failed. Her support system broke down in myriad ways: visits not made, concerned relatives not listened to, protocols not followed, insufficient visits by CPS and its private contract agency, poor quality services, caseworkers at a loss on how to handle caseloads. And the list goes on. There are any number of reasons why this tragedy happened, but there are no valid excuses.

The cascade of failures that led to Marchella Pierce’s death won’t be entirely solved by new legislation, new procedures or more money. What every child needs is someone who stands beyond the excuses. Someone like a CASA/GAL volunteer whose sole responsibility is to protect the best interests of that young person and ensure that she does not fall into the shadows. I cannot promise that our movement alone can solve all of the problems that led to this young child’s death. But I do know this: our country cannot fulfill its crucial obligation to protect abused and neglected children unless qualified community members are empowered to lift up their voices on behalf of each child. Every child in care needs someone who will fight to ensure that their future is a safe, permanent home instead of a premature obituary.

This is why we have dedicated ourselves to providing a CASA volunteer to every child in care by the year 2020. *Every child*. Not a single child in this country should be left to navigate the system alone. That is exactly what our 2020 goal is about. We can, and we will, lift up the voices of every child in the system until there are no more children in care. This is our mission. This is our calling.



## Partner Perspective

### Child Welfare and Racial Disparity: Taking Stock

Fred Wulczyn  
Senior Research Fellow  
Chapin Hall  
University of Chicago

**Fred Wulczyn is the 2011 recipient of the James E. Flynn Prize for Research and has received the National Association of Public Child Welfare Administrators' Peter Forsythe Award for leadership in public child welfare. Dr. Wulczyn is lead author of *Beyond Common Sense: Child Welfare, Child Well-Being, and the Evidence for Policy Reform* (Aldine, 2005) and coeditor of *Child Protection: Using Research to Improve Policy and Practice* (Brookings 2007). As a research and policy center, Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago focuses on improving the well-being of children and youth, families and their communities.**



Although the issue of race within the broader child welfare system has been an issue for quite some time, questions about the overrepresentation of African American children in foster care have gained particular salience in recent years. The concerns are clearly justified. At each stage of contact with the child welfare system, the odds seem to favor deeper involvement for them compared with Caucasian children. With respect to foster care in particular, research suggests that black children are about 2.7 times more likely to enter care than whites. Once in foster care, African Americans leave at a rate that is about 30% slower. On other indicators—placement stability, access to services, use of group care—black children seem to fare more poorly than whites.

With so much overwhelming evidence pointing to significant disparities, it hardly seems time to take stock or reassess the situation on the ground. Taking action would seem like the more prudent choice. Indeed, taking stock may only serve as a distraction.

But there are a couple of reasons why we may want to reflect on what we have learned over the past decade about disparity. First, it is good practice to reexamine what one thinks one knows in the pursuit of better services for children. Knowledge is not static. What we know about the challenges of serving children and families is constantly changing. "Review and revise" is a staple of the continuous quality improvement cycle that guides child welfare agencies and their partners. In that spirit, asking whether everything we learned is still true or as true as we once thought it was is a fundamentally sound way to address such an important issue.

Second, although we talk about the child welfare system as though it is a uniform approach to serving children, the truth is, the system in the US is anything but uniform. State laws differ. In 11 states, counties

provide child welfare services. A growing number of states rely on private agencies to provide a full range of child welfare services. In states that have long relied on private agencies, efforts are underway to restructure those relationships. The system is as diverse as it is dynamic. Yet we continue to paint the system with one broad brush. The system is broken; the system needs to be fixed. The temptation to use a broad brush is understandable. Whether that is helpful is unclear.

What have we learned in recent years that indicates taking stock is a good idea? Although it follows a broader interest in disparities in mental health and health care, the upswing in interest surrounding racial disparity in the child welfare system has its origins, in certain respects, in the *National Incidence Study* done in 1993. Findings from that study, which suggested that there were no differences in black/white maltreatment, were widely interpreted to mean that disparities in the system were the result of bias in the way children were handled. The argument was simple: with no difference in the underlying incidence of maltreatment, the significant overrepresentation of African Americans in the system could only come about because of how children were treated.

In the ensuing years, researchers interested in whether there is a black/white maltreatment gap have pursued the question with other sources of data including findings from a more recent *National Incidence Study (NIS-4)*. Although the details of these studies are difficult to summarize in a short essay, the main conclusions from the body of work raise fresh questions about the black/white maltreatment gap. In essence, because African Americans are so much more likely to grow up in conditions of social disadvantage, maltreatment rates do appear to be higher. These data do not mean that black parents are more likely to maltreat their children. On the contrary, recent evidence suggests that where whites raise their children in the midst of poverty, maltreatment rates are often higher than those reported for black children. The data confirm what we already know: the burdens of poverty fall more squarely on African Americans—and their children in particular. One way the burden manifests itself is in the form of higher rates of reported maltreatment among African American children.

We are also learning more about the similarities and difference that define child welfare systems at state and local levels. Although it is generally true that African Americans are overrepresented, it is not always the case to the same degree, whether one is looking at different state systems, different populations or different time periods. At the national level, overrepresentation of black children in foster care has diminished, although this may be because of reductions in urban child welfare populations. Most black children live in urban areas. But what about rural areas? Is the problem getting “smaller” everywhere or simply in certain places? We are also learning that although African Americans generally leave foster care more slowly, this is not true everywhere. Recent studies show that a significant proportion of black children are admitted to foster care in counties where the rate of reunification is higher than it is for whites. We also know that for black infants, disparities are particularly acute. One characterization, one explanation, one brush simply isn't enough.

We can be unified in our concern for why there are so many African American children touching the child welfare system, but we have to be more nuanced strategically and programmatically if we hope to address the problem in effective ways. We also have to understand that because new data are changing the way we think about the big picture, it does not mean that bias in any one of its many forms is not a part of the storyline. It simply means the real story is far more complex. Treating it any other way will leave us far short of our aspirations.



## Alum Editorial

### My Journey with Lela

Shaden Jedlicka

FosterClub 2010 All-Star Shaden Jedlicka, 21, was in and out of care from age 10. His quest for permanence ended in 2008 when he met his permanent family. Jedlicka is currently attending the University of Arkansas Fort Smith and is working part time in the Dean's Office in the College of Education. He feels that his experiences, both good and bad, have enabled him to help change the foster care system—not only for youth all across the nation but for his four brothers and three sisters as well. Jedlicka plans to earn a bachelor's degree in Early Childhood Education.



Lela Morgan, the director of children's ministries at the church I attended, taught me how to dream of the possible and to find the good in every negative. No words can describe how grateful I am for this woman. This angel!

Our journey began when I was 12 years old. At this time in my life, I was so lost and confused. My responsibility as an older brother—realistically, a father figure—was my main focus in the midst of all the drama.

Lela made many offers to help me. But instinctively protecting myself from being hurt again, I made her earn my trust. My experiences had built a wall of skepticism. Not really knowing how to protect myself, my response to any type of affection was unhealthy and many times drastic.

*Recommendation for CASA volunteers: At first, a young person might be skeptical about an advocate's commitment to them. Some youth might even try to test you. My advice is to encourage you not to take things personally. Past experiences taught me that adults only cared because they felt sorry for me, not because I had something to offer the world. Many times that potential supporter proved my theory correct, causing me to reject any form of support from an adult. Most youth feel this way, but that feeling can be reversed.*

*Meeting a youth where they are, not where you expect them to be, can amp up a CASA volunteer's efforts and revise theories of doubt and skepticism. Remember that your effectiveness will most likely be determined by your perception of who that youth was, is and will become. Commit to challenging your youth to take chances, and do not allow yourself to make assumptions based on a first impression.*

*Naturally, many youth test boundaries to see if you care enough to stick around. Openness and honesty about the situation can have a positive impact.*

Lela was the first person to ask me what I wanted to do with *my* life. Over time, our conversations became the highlight of my week. I began to love and trust again. Introducing me to her husband Gary, her three hyperactive sheep Abraham, Sarah and Bobby, her fluffy orange tomcat Col. Mustard and her dog Katie gave me a sense of pride and responsibility.

*Recommendation for CASA volunteers: Young people in foster care often experience being mistrusted by adults. Believe it or not, sharing your own personal world — like introductions to kids or pets — can signal youth that you trust and appreciate their presence.*

I have to say that I never could understand how someone could get up at 5 a.m., eat a *home-cooked* meal, read and study a section of scripture and then proceed to walk three miles every morning! Watching her every move, I wanted to know what made her so happy. I became her permanent shadow.

My fondest memories are of Lela teaching me the little things about house cleaning and doing laundry and personal hygiene. Lela taught me that sometimes it's the little things that make the greatest difference in life. "Cover your bases!" she said. "You never know what type of impact you will have on someone!" I had never met someone so eager and so willing to teach me things like that.

*Recommendation for CASA volunteers: Learning life skills in an unscripted environment is a rare experience for foster youth. My advice is to go off the cuff. Asking youth to let you help them with their laundry on a rainy day can provide quality bonding time.*

When I came into foster care for the second time, Lela persistently invited me to go to church. Every time the chance arose, she included me. Having someone care so much and knowing that this person would always be there was something I had never experienced. She connected with my foster parents so that she could continue to be a part of my life.

*Recommendation for CASA volunteers: Many times youth in or entering the foster care system find themselves lost and confused about who they are—really who everyone wants them to be. Encourage youth to define who they are and who they want to become.*

*Try to broaden the young person's horizons. Celebrate their victories and even their failures. There is a positive in every negative, and sometimes it takes someone like a CASA volunteer to point it out. The only limitations you have to making a connection are the ones you place on yourself.*

For my 16<sup>th</sup> birthday, Lela *handmade* a quilt for me and stitched on the back of it "To: Shady, From: Momma Lela." Giving it to me, she said, "It is OK to have more than one mom!" Her encouragement allowed me to find a forever family that same year.

*Recommendation for CASA volunteers: Even after young people find permanence, they can often struggle with their "new life." An advocate has the ability to aid and lighten this struggle. Support during this difficult transition is vital. Encourage the youth to be open and receptive to their new family. Work closely together and support what you both see as their best interest. Encourage them to define the bigger picture.*

Overcoming sibling separation, transition, psychotropic medication, depression and a negative perception of who I thought I was can only be described as my second step to personal success. Lela's belief in me allowed me to believe in myself. As a result, I now have webs of support at the ready when life gets tough.

My story is just one example of how a positive mentor can make a big difference. Personally, I would like to thank all CASA volunteers and supporters. Your dedication has already changed lives for the better. I challenge you to self-reflect every day. Everything we say and do is being recorded by the eyes of a child. What type of impact do you make?



Closing Words

**Snapshots from My Journey to Family**

*Jimmy Wayne*

*National CASA Spokesperson*

I am proud to be National CASA’s newest spokesperson because I understand the foster care system after being part of it for much of my childhood. Let me show you why else I value CASA volunteers through three glimpses at turning points in my life.

**1985: Becoming Homeless**

I’ll never forget my 13<sup>th</sup> summer. I spend a lot of it watching my granddad roll his own cigarettes. So I get this idea. I’ll roll up dried tomato leaves with a few marijuana seeds and sell these joints to the neighborhood potheads. Every other Wednesday, I take my earnings to the convenience store and buy a money order to send to Raleigh State Penitentiary. My mother is serving time there. I think she’ll be very proud and thankful that I’ve worked hard so she can have cigarettes and V05 shampoo in prison. But when she is finally released, she doesn’t even come see me for over a week.

When she does show up, she is with a new man. Tim is a little different from all the other stepdads—at first. Until the night he takes me for a ride down a country back road. He hands me a gun and tells me to load it. I don’t know what to do. I am 13 years old, so I do what I’m told. Then Tim pulls up to a house and unloads the gun into the building. He flees the scene, pulls over on a side road and turns his headlights out. The police fly by. As we sit there, he grows more and more agitated and

suddenly punches me in the face—unprovoked. I bleed all over my favorite shirt. Tim then puts the gun against my temple and pulls the trigger. My head turns slightly, just enough for the barrel to slide off and send the bullet through the windshield. I get out of the car and run.

The next night, Tim hands me the gun again. The people he’d fired at have come to our house for revenge. I say, “No, I’m not going to do this.” But he screams at me until I finally load his gun again. And I watch as Tim shoots someone in our

yard, who we later learn was left paralyzed.



**Jimmy Wayne learned about the CASA movement when he was asked by CASA of Orange County to keynote for their annual holiday luncheon in 2010. This November, Howard Books will publish his novella, Paper Angels, inspired by his childhood. Read about Meet Me Halfway, Wayne’s 1,700-mile walk across America last year to raise awareness of the needs of older youth in care, at [ProjectMMH.org](http://ProjectMMH.org).**





Tim flees North Carolina, taking me and my mom with him. We live in the car for about two months. Mom rolls up a ball of clothes under her shirt, pretending she's pregnant to collect money for food and gas. We go all the way to Oklahoma and Texas, staying at rest stops and homeless shelters. One night at about 1:30 a.m., Tim makes a U-turn back toward Pensacola, Florida. I am asleep in the backseat. He wakes me and says, "Get out of the car." Drowsily, I meet my mom at the trunk. She hands me my clothes and hugs me. She gets back in the car, and they drive away. And they never come back.

I find myself truly homeless for the first time in my life. No one to call, nowhere to go. I am standing in a parking lot in the middle of the night with my bag of clothes. I have to get really strong really fast. I figure it out. The next three years of my life, I live on the streets and in the occasional foster home. I attend 12 schools in two years. I go from being sad to getting mad to trying to be bad.

## 1988: Finding Family



At 16, I am traveling down the road on a bicycle that I "borrowed." And I see this elderly man standing in his woodshop. He is cutting dashers for a butter churn, which it turns out he and his wife make and sell. Being hungry, I ask him if there is any work I can do.

Russell Costner introduces himself and says, "You need to ask the boss over there." He points to his wife, Bea, this little white-haired lady walks over—apron, cotton dress, glasses, sawdust all over her arms. She says, "If you cut grass, come back this afternoon." I become their lawn boy for the summer, visiting every other week.

One day, Ms. Costner brings me a Coca-Cola and a little apple tree, she asks, "Where do you live?" I tell her, "Up the street from here." I don't want her to know I am homeless because she might fire me.

She says, "Russell and I have been talking and want to know if you'd be interested in moving into our home." I don't have any hope that this will last, but I think, "Hey, I'll have a few days off the street with a bed to sleep in—why not?"

The fourth day arrives. Russell meets me in the hallway and says, "I need to talk to you about something." Here we go—I naturally assume he is kicking me out. He says, "Come in here and sit down." I begin to sweat. "If you're going to stay here, you've got to do two things: cut off all your hair and come to church with us."

I end up staying with the Costners the rest of the summer and for the next six years. This family single-handedly changes every cell in my body. I would not be here today, let alone have a music career, if it weren't for Russell and Bea.



## 1996: Saying Thank You...and Goodbye

Some years later, I do a little show at a school in North Carolina. I am driving Bea back to her house afterward. Russell has already passed away. Being a kid in the system, you're not used to hearing people say they love you. So you're not used to saying it either. But something tells me to say how much I appreciate everything she's done for me. I'm driving the car and I mumble, "I love you." She looks at me with a surprised smile and says, "I love you too!"

"Thanks for everything," I say. "I wouldn't have these clothes...I wouldn't have this car...I wouldn't have my education—heck, everything I have is because of you."

We pull up to her house. I walk around the car and help her inside. She stands at the glass storm door, looks at me and says, "Goodbye, Jimmy."

I say, "I'll see you in a couple of days."

She says again, "Goodbye, Jimmy."

And she starts waving. It's like I'm already a million miles away. She says it over and over and keeps waving. I wave at her, and she waves at me. I'm backing up the car, waving out the window. I get to the road and keep blowing my horn and waving.

That night I get a call from her daughter. Needless to say, that was the very last conversation Ms. Costner and I ever had. But I had the chance to tell her that I loved her and that I appreciated her before it was too late.

Many of the children served by CASA and GAL volunteer advocates don't get the chance to tell them how much their help has meant to them. I'm speaking now on behalf of them: They appreciate you and everything you're doing for them. They may not act like it. Lord knows I didn't. But I know good and well they do.

## 2011: Becoming a National Spokesman

From the age of 8 I moved through formal and informal foster care, but I never had a CASA volunteer to give me a hand up. Thank God I finally found the Costners.

Learning about the CASA volunteer movement late in 2010 knocked me out. I had been frustrated to no end that young people are still allowed to age out of foster care without the resources they need. It shouldn't be possible to be "emancipated" without support. An 18-year-old should not have to go to a homeless shelter or sleep on the couch of a friend.





These youth deserve to be treated with respect and to receive the education and medical care they need—and to be made aware of all the help available to them.

It was an incredible feeling to speak at National CASA's conference back in March. To be surrounded by a huge roomful of people with the same vision to help children. In my career, I've been fortunate to perform on stages like Madison Square Garden and the Grand Ole Opry. But I was just as thankful to be in that hotel banquet room in Chicago speaking to 1,400 people committed to abused children.

I appreciate every single CASA volunteer and supporter. What you're doing says so much about you. It's my honor to be associated with the greatest charity organization I know of. God bless you all.



**Wayne wrote the following song based on an experience he had in college on a field trip to a juvenile detention center. At the conference, he introduced the song by saying, "I struggled to respond to what this officer was saying—that these kids are trash— because I recognized him all these years later from when he checked me into the detention center on my 15th birthday. I was so scared that I was shaking, but I had to answer him while surrounded by the other students in the class who knew nothing about me."**

## Where You're Going

© 2009 by Jimmy Wayne

When I was in college my class went on a trip  
to a place down the road where the county kept delinquent kids.  
An old man with a badge said to the class  
"In here we have all kinds of trash."  
I could not believe what I just heard, at first I wasn't gonna say a word.

It's not where you've been, it's where you're going.  
It's not who you were back then, it's who you are at this moment.  
Kinda like looking at an old photograph, remembering way back when.  
It's not where you've been, it's where you're going.

I said, "Excuse me, sir. I know you won't remember me.  
But try to imagine how I looked when I'd just turned 15.

# THE Connection

Summer 2011

Defiant, scared and confused, dirty clothes and tattoos, nothing really left to lose.  
You see the last door on the right? Sir, that door used to be mine."

We all have a story we can tell.  
Some's been lost, some hurt, some of us have been through hell.  
Well the past is a ghost, a door that's been closed, the start of a winding road.  
And I know without a doubt, that doesn't matter now, cause...

It's not where you've been, it's where you're going.  
It's not who you were back then, it's who you are at this moment.  
Kinda like looking at an old photograph, remembering way back when.  
It's not where you've been, it's where you're going.

**Program Spotlight**

**Celebrating 30 Years Standing Up for Abused Children**

**Sharon Balaban**  
Corporate Relations  
Dallas CASA, TX



A 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary, or any CASA program anniversary, is most certainly cause for celebration, especially when those three decades have focused on helping abused and neglected children find their way to the safe, permanent homes they so desperately need.

From the first class of 10 volunteers who served about 25 children back in 1980, Dallas CASA has grown to a corps of 500 dedicated volunteer advocates serving more than 1,300 child victims in 2010. Last year, we knew that we wanted to celebrate our 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary in a way that paid tribute to all who had made it possible, who paved the way for the work we do today. Although it was exciting to be celebrating such a huge milestone, the thought of adding to the four major annual events already on the calendar was somewhat daunting.

Five years ago, we had a typical gala-style affair to celebrate our 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Members of the steering committee created for the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary year determined that they wanted to do something different: focus on a broader initiative to raise the level of community awareness about a child’s right to be safe. We wanted our celebration to bring forth a commitment from the entire community to become involved. The anniversary year would culminate in an event to thank and celebrate our volunteers, donors and stakeholders—those responsible for making sure that children in the protective care of the courts continue to have powerful voices. We knew that this approach would be much more labor-intensive than planning a single event. But it had the potential for long-lasting impact and for creating new relationships.

In the past, Dallas CASA had struggled with the area of community awareness. The status of abused and neglected children in foster care and the work of our volunteer advocates were still unknown to most people. The committee decided that every event and PR opportunity during the course of the anniversary year would be branded with our 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary campaign—people in our community needed to know about us and understand the concept of what we do. Only then would they accept and endorse the idea that we all have a part in making our community safer for our most vulnerable children—and that one of the best ways to do that is by getting involved with Dallas CASA.



Co-chairs Madeleine Johnson and Paul Coggins, Dallas CASA’s 30th Anniversary homecoming queen and king

The choice of steering committee co-chairs was critical to the direction the committee would take in planning the anniversary year. Paul Coggins, former US attorney and currently a partner with Dallas firm Locke Lord Bissell & Liddell LLP, agreed to chair. Paul is a past president and long-time member of the Dallas CASA board. He in turn asked Madeleine Johnson, general counsel of Southwest Airlines and

former Dallas city attorney, to be his co-chair. Paul, Madeleine and seven steering committee members devised a plan to engage community leaders to “stand up” and help make Dallas safer for all children. They pulled out all the stops to enlist their colleagues’ support and develop new community partnerships.

The cornerstones of the campaign included two groups, the *Committee for 30* and the *Leadership Counsel of 30*. The *Committee for 30* comprised more than 40 corporate, organizational and civic leaders who publicly endorsed Dallas CASA. The committee included heads of law enforcement agencies, CEOs of major hospitals and corporations as well as leaders in education and faith communities.

A separate group, the *Leadership Counsel of 30*, comprised general counsel from Dallas-based corporations who pledged to help recruit volunteers and spread the word about the community’s role in responding to cases of child abuse and neglect. The group included general counsel from Archon Group, L.P., BlueCross BlueShield of Texas, Exxon Mobil Corporation, FedEx Office, Frito-Lay of North America, Kimberly-Clark, Inc., Mary Kay, Inc., Pioneer Natural Resources and Texas Instruments. Meetings with the general counsel were held individually, and all were asked what they could do to help. By letting these individuals lead the way, the results were more diverse, organic and meaningful. Their response was overwhelmingly positive—everyone wanted to help, and relationships with those corporations continue to grow.



The Leadership Counsel of 30 opened doors to new relationships with corporations. Pictured left to right: 30th Anniversary co-chairs Madeleine Johnson and Paul Coggins; former Supreme Court of Texas Justice Hon. Eva Guzman; Counsel member Ron Barger, former Supreme Court of Texas Justice Hon. Harriet O’Neill; and Counsel member Mark Berg.

The celebration event was held toward the end of the anniversary year—a *Homecoming Reunion*, bringing together volunteers from throughout Dallas CASA’s 30-year history. The timing of the reunion event resulted in three major events held over the course of three months: the annual *Parade of Playhouses* in August, the *Justice Is Served* dinner in September and the *30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary* event in October. Busy, yes. And worthwhile beyond measure.

Dallas CASA was privileged to be able to hire a staff person to coordinate the initiatives of the *30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary*. However, it’s important to note that programs without a budget for contracting short-term staff should not feel they cannot produce an anniversary-year celebration. The job may be accomplished mostly by volunteers. In fact, Dallas CASA’s 30<sup>th</sup> year was a success because of the many dedicated volunteers who poured out their passion for helping our community’s children. The entire staff was instrumental in making it a success, but the *30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary* would not have had the same impact without the hard work and cooperation of our board, steering committee, the co-chairs and—especially—our extraordinary volunteers.

## Top Tips for Volunteers

### Five Steps toward Improving the Foster Care System

**Charles Lerner**  
Program Manager  
CASA of Santa Cruz County, CA

As a former foster child, adoptee and professional in the child welfare field, I have lived or worked in the foster care system my entire life. My own disheartening experiences of living in care are shared by many foster youth who came before—and after—me. Outcomes for these youth remain discouragingly consistent. The role CASA volunteers play in the lives of these young people is like no other. Few strategies for addressing the challenges of children in care are as effective or have more influence. I have met countless CASA volunteers, supporters and staff across the country. One thing we cannot seem to keep from discussing is, “How can we make the system better?” I think we should be engaging in this conversation every day. I am honored to have the opportunity to share some of my thoughts on this question.



#### 1. Keep children with their families whenever possible.

Easier said than done, but hundreds of thousands of young people are away from their families for causes that are not being adequately addressed in our society. They include poverty, marginalization and resulting factors such as substance abuse and mental illness. We know children of color are overrepresented in the foster care system, and we cannot separate the fact that their families are more likely to live in poverty and experience discrimination. Poverty means getting by without a car even if you live in a remote area. It means learning to live day to day without a checking account or credit card, perhaps without electricity or a phone. It may mean having to leave your children home alone while you go to work—even if you don’t want to. Until we more successfully address social conditions that are hurtful to all of us, children will be living out the consequences.

#### 2. Be compassionate with parents.

What does it take for *you* to accept help from others? Most of us would agree that we must trust someone before we are able to accept their help. I feel a strong connection with parents involved in the dependency system. My own mother was 14 when she gave birth to me, and I did not see her from the time I was 4 until 22. After I met her as an adult, she asked me, “Why are you not angry with me?” I responded, “How could I be angry with you? You were 14!” I am not advocating that we absolve parents of responsibility. They have the responsibility to make the changes—if possible—to become safe and appropriate parents; to rebuild trust with their children and commit to healing the family. Recovering from addiction, ending the multi-generational cycle of abuse and accessing the resources that can help someone parent with mental illness are especially difficult challenges. Change takes time, and delays are not always due to a lack of desire. Our biases can inhibit our empathy for parents and the challenges they face, but it helps to think of the difficulties we ourselves face when trying to make changes in our own lives. The awareness that we need to change is seldom enough to make change happen. Being more

compassionate and affirming with the parents of the children we serve may not always lead to a better outcome. But helping parents to not feel judged can sometimes free them to acknowledge that although they are still mom or dad, they can't be the everyday parent. I have seen compassion strengthen parents in their ability to overcome adversity and find greater motivation to change.

### **3. Research existing relationships to get children out of foster care as quickly as possible.**

We want children to return to their families as soon as possible. If they cannot return home, we want to move them out of limbo and into relational, physical and legal permanency. In other words, we want them to have someone they can count on, a place to call home and people they can claim—and who claim them—as family. Experience shows us that people who are known to our children are often the people who will provide them with permanency. You might not consider adopting a child you don't know, but what if I were to ask you to consider becoming the caregiver for your nephew, your daughter's best friend or a student you used to teach? You might feel an existing bond with the child or a sense of familial responsibility, and you might say yes. More and more CASA programs are assisting with child-specific recruitment of adoptive parents and guardians, delving deeply into the lives of youth to discover who they care about and who cares about them. This work is critical to getting children out of the system as soon as possible and connected with people who can provide a familiar and safe place for them.

### **4. Meet children where they are.**

Some young people are angry with their parents and the world in general. They should be. They have not been protected and cared for the way children are entitled to be. That is why taking a "no-fault" approach is essential. Most youth experience sadness, despair and anger. How could we expect anything different? Youth express these emotions through tantrums, school difficulties, running away, getting involved with gangs or using drugs. These are fairly normative responses to what they have gone through. Their behaviors may leave us feeling frustrated and hopeless about their futures. But we must maintain hope—because many of our children have lost it. I have seen countless young people with these behaviors turn the corner after increased stability, security, positive relationships and services. It takes time. We cannot expect children to endure the levels of loss they have experienced and pull out of it within six months. It has been 30 years since I exited the foster care system, yet not a day goes by that I do not have some memory associated with my time in care.

### **5. Make decisions and implement them as though the child were a member of your own family.**

Time does not move quickly for children when they are away from their families and living in a state of uncertainty. High caseloads and the bureaucracy of the system make it difficult to make things happen as quickly as we would hope. And for youth removed from the home, reunification is predicated on whether the loved ones they were removed from will change the conditions which led to removal. Every day in foster care is like a week, every week like a month and every month a year. We will not always be able to address the needs of the children we serve as quickly as we want. At times we may even lose sight of their needs. This is why CASA programs are such critical and influential assets in the child welfare system. Magical things happen for children when someone gives them a voice. Isn't that what we want for every child?

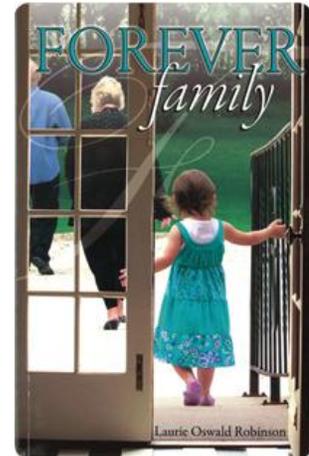


## Book Club

### *Forever Family*

By Laurie Oswald Robinson; [talesofthetimes.com](http://talesofthetimes.com); 2010; 138 pages

Join Laurie and Alfonso Robinson as foster-to-adopt parents on a journey of more than two years as they wait for the courts to decide whether they will fulfill their dream—to become the forever family for baby Sarah. A true story which shines a light on the often agonizing role of a family working hard to create a nurturing, loving, stable and hopefully permanent environment for a child while systems and laws decide her future. Sarah is more fortunate than many as she has two families who love her and want to care for her. Will bonding or blood be in Sarah's best interests? Read *Forever Family* to find out.





We are excited about our new *I Am for the Child* campaign. As you see it unfold over the next few months, we believe you will be as well. We have high expectations for this effort, and we look forward to sharing the results with you in future editions of *The Connection*.

## Welcome New Training Director Anthony Petrarca

On July 7, Anthony Petrarca joined the National CASA staff as our new training director. Anthony brings over 10 years of experience designing and developing training programs, directing training initiatives and advocating for children. For seven years prior to coming to National CASA, Petrarca served as training manager with Committee for Children, where he was responsible for the design, implementation and evaluation of 11 training courses on abuse and violence prevention topics. Before that position, he worked with Skookum, a nonprofit that provides supported employment for people with significant disabilities. Petrarca holds a master of arts in psychology, a master of divinity and a bachelor of arts in communications.



## Child Welfare News

### Free Life Insurance Policy for Working Families

The Massachusetts Mutual Life Insurance Company (MassMutual) is offering a free, 10-year life insurance policy to working families who meet certain income and health qualifications. The policy offers a death benefit of \$50,000 to be used to cover educational expenses of dependent children, including foster children. To learn more about the *LifeBridge* policy, visit MassMutual's [corporate responsibility web page](#).

### Crime During Transition to Adulthood

Research by Chapin Hall suggests that foster youth, like their peers, engage in less crime as they move into adulthood. While youth in care report more crime than their peers as they approach the transition, by ages 19 and 21 there are few differences between the groups. However, foster youth remain much more likely than their peers to be arrested. Read the full report at [Chapin Hall's website](#).

### New Fostering Connections Section of NRCPPFC Website

A new section of the National Resource Center for Permanency and Family Connections (NRCPPFC) website features news and updates on the *Fostering Connections to Success Act*. The *Fostering Connections* education webpage currently offers information on the following topics: promising practices and policies from states and tribes, T/TA & web based resources from NRCs, Children's Bureau and the T/TA Network; resources from collaborating organizations; and evidence-based practice, research and reports. The [section](#) will be continuously updated. For more on this topic, see the [July 2011](#) edition of *The Judges' Page*.

### Running Away from Foster Care

New research conducted and compiled for the National Runaway Switchboard indicates that runaway youth were more likely to have exited and reentered the foster care system and had more placements on average than the typical youth in foster care. Unlike other runaways, youth who run away from foster care are generally not trying to escape from abuse or neglect, although they may experience conflict with caregivers. Having been separated from their families and friends, youth who run away from foster care are sometimes seen as running to something rather than running away. The [report](#) is available online.

### Judicial Guide to Implementing Fostering Connections

The American Bar Association Center on Children and the Law, the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges and the National Center for State Courts recently announced a new publication, the *Judicial Guide to Implementing the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008*. This guide contains an analysis of the barriers faced by courts as well as implementation strategies to overcome these barriers. [Download the guide](#).

## Reinstating Parental Rights for Youth in Care

Despite federal and state laws that require termination of parental rights when a child has remained in foster care for a specified period of time, studies indicate that relationships with their biological parents (and other relatives) are important to children and youth in foster care. Once it becomes clear that the purpose of terminating parental rights will not be fulfilled (i.e., child will not be freed for adoption), children in care, social work agencies and parents are increasingly approaching the courts asking that the legal relationship between the child and parent be reinstated. A recent teleconference by the National Resource Center for Permanency and Family Connections discussed what some states are doing to find permanency for youth in this situation by reinstating one or both of their parents' rights. Listen to the audio and see materials from [this event](#).

## Reducing Problems for Middle-School Girls in Foster Care

Girls in foster care have been shown to be at risk for emotional and behavioral problems, especially during the preadolescent and adolescent years. A recent study published in *Prevention Science* indicated that an intervention prior to middle-school entry can reduce problems and increase prosocial behavior among girls. Read the abstract for free online or purchase the full report by subscribing to [springerlink.com](http://springerlink.com).

Do you have news about the child welfare field to share with *Connection* readers? We'd love to hear about it! Send an email with a brief summary to [theconnection@nationalcasa.org](mailto:theconnection@nationalcasa.org).



## Field Notes

### Car Show Benefits CASA Program

#### CASA of South Central Kentucky, Bowling Green, KY

Bowling Green is a town that loves classic cars. The city, billed as the “home of the Corvette,” hosts dozens of car shows each year. For the second year, CASA of South Central Kentucky held its own car show at the Best Western Motor Inn. Director Will Constable noted that even though the event was smaller than the previous year, the program reached its goal of raising over \$5,000, mostly through sponsorships. A total of 17 trophies were awarded, and the event featured children’s activities, raffle, silent auction and a live broadcast from local radio station WBVR.



**Husband-and-wife team of CASA volunteer Don Parker and Advocate Coordinator Irene Parker, who was the lead staff person organizing the car show**



**1936 MG**

## CASA Program Screens Foster Care Documentary

### CASA of Orange County, Santa Ana, CA

The feature documentary *From Place to Place* follows two youth who age out of foster care and then set out to change the system that raised them. CASA of Orange County recently hosted a screening of the film for its staff and volunteers. The film's producer, Matt Anderson, was on hand for the screening and the panel discussion that followed, which also included foster youth from the region. "The film is a great tool to motivate, inspire and energize advocates as well as the community at large," said Training Director Mandy Schwartz. Upcoming screenings are planned in coordination with several CASA programs across the country. For more information about the documentary, visit [fromplacetoplacemovie.com](http://fromplacetoplacemovie.com).





## CASA Cavalry Takes the Court

### Nevada CASA Association, Reno, NV

Nevada Governor Brian Sandoval joined local celebrities and community members in a benefit basketball game for Nevada CASA. The home team, dubbed the Nevada CASA Cavalry, competed against the Harlem Ambassadors, a team of talented players who tour nationally to raise money for community groups and nonprofits. The event raised over \$6,000 for Nevada CASA. The event was so popular, according to Program Assistant Meg Davis, that they ended up with a waiting list of people who wanted to play in the game. “We made several great connections while recruiting our team,” said Davis, “including one business that has offered to partner with us for future events.”



## Cajun Cuisine for CASA

### CASA of Terrebonne, Houma, LA

Crawfish, music and fun were on the menu at the 4<sup>th</sup> Annual Crawfish Boil-off on May 14, held at the Southdown Bar and Grill. Over \$14,000 was raised—far exceeding the program’s goal. The event featured 22 teams competing for prizes for the best boiled crawfish. The event also featured live music, a bounce house and other children’s entertainment and a live auction. One of the highlights was the crawfish themselves, which were served directly out of a pirogue (a traditional Cajun fishing boat).



**Volunteer Darlene Flynn with her mother, Naire Prosperie**



## Coloring Book—CASA Speaks for Polly

### CASA of Northeast Tennessee, Johnson City, TN

Polly is a young possum who helps children understand the juvenile court process and the role of the CASA volunteer (represented by Cassie Bear). Polly is the star of the coloring book *CASA Speaks for Polly*, the brainchild of former volunteer Daniel Rowland, who was named 2010 CASA Volunteer of the Year by the Tennessee Bar Association’s Young Lawyer Division. Through a small grant, CASA of Northeast Tennessee was able to distribute the book to every child served. After the Young Lawyers Division learned about the book, they raised money to print thousands of copies. A local restaurant donated 5,000 crayon packets to accompany the books. “Because of the generosity of young lawyers around the state and several corporate donors, approximately 5,000 children in Tennessee’s juvenile court system will be able to use this coloring book to better understand the role of CASA volunteers and the legal system in their lives,” said Katrina Atchley of the Tennessee Bar Association. The book is available for download at [tba.org/YLD/edict/downloads/casa\\_speaks\\_for\\_polly.pdf](http://tba.org/YLD/edict/downloads/casa_speaks_for_polly.pdf).

