

New Mexico CASA Volunteers Leverage Community Connections to Create Homes for Youth Aging Out of Foster Care

In May 2007, John and Jean Whiteside, CASA volunteers with Bernalillo County CASA in Albuquerque, NM, happened onto a situation that changed the lives of not only the children in their CASA cases but also the lives of dozens of local youth aging out of the foster care system.

Just before she retired from her job as a real estate agent, Jean listed a property for the trustees of an estate. The owners, an elderly couple, had both died, leaving behind their home and all of its contents: furniture, dishes, pictures, linens, televisions, pots and pans...all the things a family would need to furnish a home.

When she asked the trustees what they would do with everything in the house, they said they would probably call Goodwill to come pick it up. "Whoa!" Jean said, "I have a family that could really use all these things." She explained that the four CASA youth she and John were advocating for were going back to live with their mother. The state had rented a nice four-bedroom house for them, but it was completely empty; there was not even a chair to sit on.

The trustees agreed to give everything to the Whitesides if they agreed to move it all themselves. It took a week of hard work, but, with the assistance of their grandson, Erik Lee, and neighbors Don and Georgia Beatty, they got it all moved.

The couple quickly realized that their efforts to help this one family could be replicated to help



Don Beatty and his grandson, Jacob, unload furniture donated to help another foster care alumnus get off to a good start in his first apartment.

others, particularly youth who were aging out of the system with few possessions. Jean began contacting real estate agents about the possibility of collecting furniture and household goods to distribute to emancipating youth in need.

Though she is now retired from real estate, Jean continues to leverage her connections and makes pitches to new groups of realtors during their weekly sales meetings. Through these efforts, she and John have filled three donated storage

units with furniture, appliances, televisions and kitchenware. With the help of friends, they are furnishing two to three apartments each month and always stand ready to make another delivery. Says Jean: "We'll do whatever it takes to help these kids get off to a good start—but we're always hoping that their new apartment is on the ground floor!"

Jean is happy to share her advice and lessons learned. Contact her by email at whiteside9@msn.com. 📧