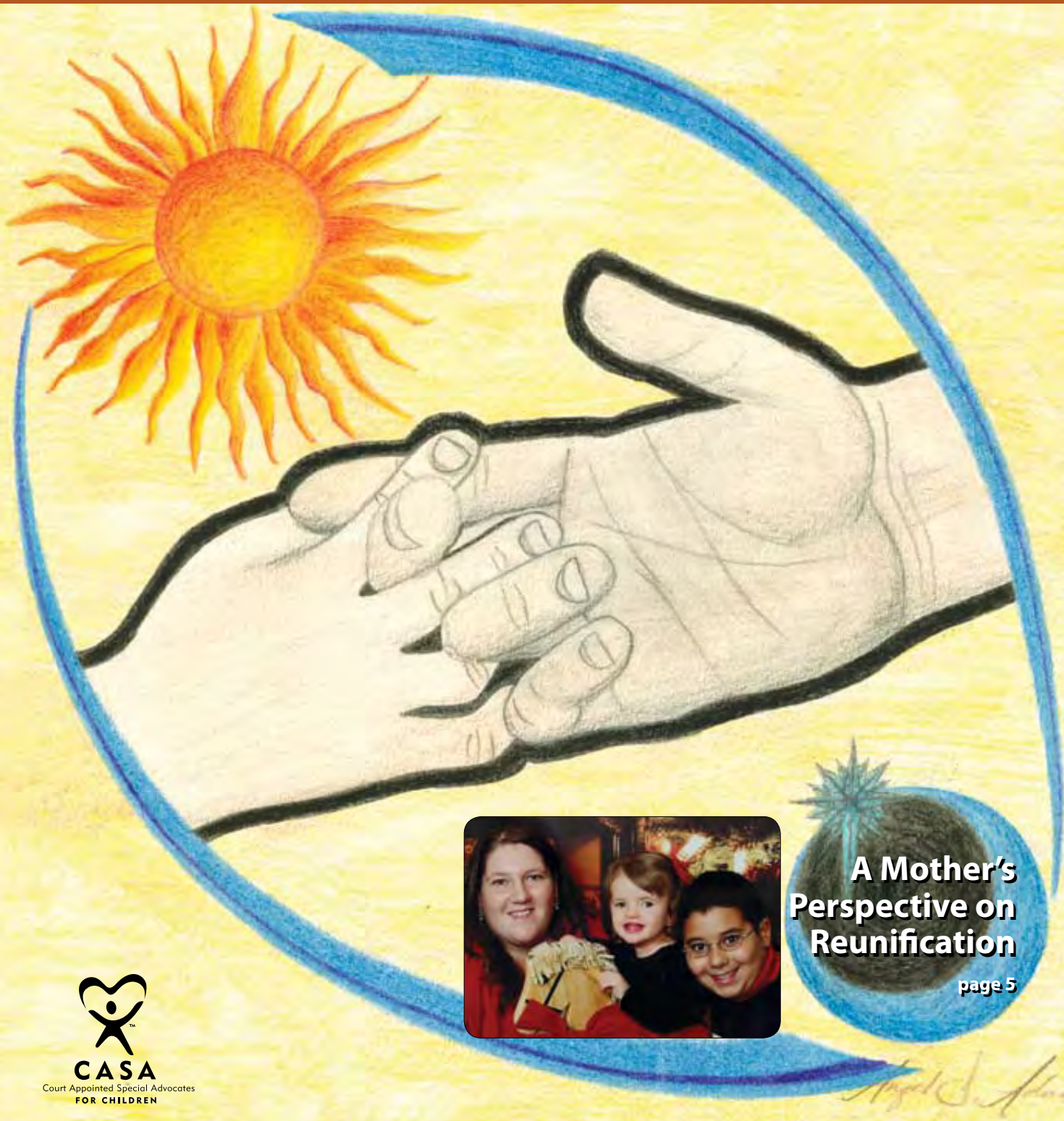


THE Connection

News and Information from the National Court Appointed Special Advocate Association



A Mother's Perspective on Reunification

page 5



CASA
Court Appointed Special Advocates
FOR CHILDREN

Cover Story:

Working Towards Family Reunification
page 10

Features:

Profile of Youth Cover Artist
page 6

Historic Child Welfare Legislation Enacted
page 21

volunteer voice

Barbara Himebaugh

2008 G.F. Bettineski Child Advocate of the Year
Pima County CASA Program
Tucson, AZ

I have served as a CASA volunteer for nearly 20 years, with 21 cases involving more than 40 children. Why have I stayed involved this long? Because I know there's always another child who needs an advocate. The foster care system is not a good way to raise children in the long term. So my goal is to find permanency for children, whether it be reunification with the parent if that's possible, a relative placement or a loving adoptive home.

My role is to get to know the children and learn everything I can about their lives. I make it very clear to everyone involved—parents in particular—that my role is advocacy for the children and not for anyone else. I seek what's in the best interest of the child. It is up to the judge to make the decision; I am simply there to give information about the situation and what I feel is best for the child.

In one of my cases that ended in reunification, the mom had initially not been able to protect her children. But she had therapy with a good mental health professional during the few months of the case. The children were placed back with mom. She was severely tested when her boyfriend tried to hurt the children again. But she was strong enough to take the children and leave.

Parents should always be offered the services they need to be successful in reuniting with their children. If they don't take advantage of this help, there's little hope for reunification. And that's a great loss to children. They are much better off to grow up with their birth parents—or, if that's not possible, to live with a relative.

Unfortunately, not many of my cases have resulted in reunification. Too often, parents are so deep into drug or alcohol abuse that they give up. They can't complete the needed program, such as residential treatment, so their rights end up being terminated.

Some people may consider kinship care to be another kind of reunification. One of my recent cases involved four children whose grandmother wanted to be their guardian. However, her relationship with the case manager, therapist and other service providers was uncooperative. She did not want "outsiders" involved in the family's business. Despite the grandmother's volatility, I established and maintained a positive relationship with her, advocated for necessary services and persuaded her to accept help for both herself and the children. Later, I was very proud that the case manager wrote to my program about this case, saying that as a result of CASA's involvement, the children "have been able to stay in their placement and not had to be disrupted once again."

For me, the most difficult aspect of being a volunteer is when a child ages out of the foster care system without a permanent family. That has happened in some of my cases, often because the children came into the system at an age for which adoptive homes are hard to find.

If someone said to me, "I could never do what you do as a volunteer—it seems too difficult," I would tell them that I think they can, with the training and support provided by the CASA program

staff. But if you find you're not comfortable with volunteer advocacy, there are many other ways that you can help children in care. For example, you can make a donation to your local CASA program or volunteer to help with non-advocacy activities—either with CASA or another child welfare-related nonprofit organization.

Overall, I think the difficulties of volunteering are outweighed by the cases that close successfully with

reunification, kinship care or adoption. In fact, this is what I like best about being an advocate: seeing a happy outcome for the children. I'm usually on the verge of tears of joy, just knowing they are in a permanent placement where they will be well cared for and have the love they deserve. 🏠



Nationwide Child Protection and Family Reunification—A Century of Mixed Results

Michael S. Piraino
CEO, National CASA



It has been 99 years since the first White House Conference on Children. That first conference was hosted by Theodore Roosevelt and focused on dependent children. Additional White House conferences on children were held about every 10 years until 1970.

That's right. The last White House Conference on Children was held 38 years ago.

Back in 1909, materials from that first conference stated: "Home life is the highest and finest product of civilization. ...Children should not be deprived of it except for urgent and compelling reasons." The conference acknowledged that when families cannot meet their children's needs, government must help, but it must investigate scientifically and carefully.

For nearly a century now, child welfare has struggled to fairly balance the two ideals of that first White House conference—protection of children and respect for families. When these values collide, children can be hurt.

One of the simplistic beliefs about the emergence of systems of child protection in the United States is that it happened because a child died. Nine-year-old Mary Ellen did indeed die in 1874 in New York City. But children had died before. Perhaps the most significant confluence back then was a child's death combined with the willingness of the press and the public to see government expand its reach into family life.

Child fatalities in our times can be every bit as appalling as was Mary Ellen's. Just take a look at the recent case of Danieal Kelly. Danieal, a 14-year-old with cerebral palsy, died of starvation two years ago while in state care in Philadelphia. A grand jury has just indicted nine people, including her parents and agency workers. (If you want to read the report, available by searching online, a warning: it is graphic and disturbing.)

The most startling of the findings in the 250-page grand jury report was that Danieal's death had nothing to

do with high caseloads or any lack of funding. It simply came down to a lack of will. Too many people who knew what was going on did nothing.

A horrific case like this should prompt everyone, as one of our volunteers recently said, to "get off their duffs and do something." But most child protection failures are not the result of individuals who can but do not do their jobs. Failures are more often the result of policies that have not provided the means to keep children safe.

Judges, lawyers and caseworkers too often struggle to meet children's needs without the necessary time or resources. A report in California has just identified some of the challenges that state has in trying to watch over the needs of 80,000 abused and neglected children. Judges and commissioners have average caseloads of 1,000 each. Lawyers for children average 273 cases.

Ninety-nine years after the first White House Conference on Children, we should have a national commitment to ensuring that child protection systems never forget the needs of the children they were established to protect. And there is, in fact, some hope these days. The Child Welfare League of America has spearheaded an effort to encourage the next administration to host a conference in 2010 to focus on child welfare. Bipartisan legislation has been introduced in Congress to support it.

If the conference happens, we will do all we can to highlight the essential role of CASA/GAL advocacy—unbiased, non-judgmental and evidence-based advocacy—as a crucial element of effective protection of children and safe reunification of families. Both are important because most parents can be helped to properly care for and nurture their children. Perhaps finally, after a century, we will all be able to join in coordinated national efforts to ensure that every child is protected, preferably in their own families by parents who love them. 🚩

THE Connection

News and Information from the National Court Appointed Special Advocate Association



A publication of the National CASA Association, representing 954 program offices and 59,717 CASA volunteers serving 243,295 children nationwide.

CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocates) is a nationwide movement of community volunteers who speak up for the best interests of abused and neglected children.

CASA volunteers work for the judge to review and monitor cases of children who become part of the child protection system. CASA volunteers work closely with the child and family to bring an independent assessment of the case to court, recommending to the judge what is best for the child's future.

CASA volunteers help prevent children from becoming "lost" in the child welfare system. CASA gives children a chance to grow up in safe, permanent homes.

Hon. Ernestine Gray *President*
 Mimi Feller *Immediate Past President*
 Renne Bilson *Vice President*
 Michael Piraino *Chief Executive Officer*
 James Clune *Chief Communications Officer*
 Michael Skinner Mendelow *Managing Editor*
 Sharon Heiber *Contributing Editor*
 Brian Lew *Contributing Editor*
 Theresa Carleton *Archivist*
 Sybil Turner *Contributing Writer*

The Connection is designed to keep CASA programs, volunteers and the public abreast of the latest news and developments affecting CASA's work with abused and neglected children. Written contributions are welcome. Published quarterly by the National CASA Association.

The Connection is produced and paid for by the National CASA Association.

This project was supported by Cooperative Agreement No. 2008-CH-FX-K001 from the Office of Juvenile Justice & Delinquency Prevention, Office of Justice Programs, US Department of Justice. Points of view or opinions in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the US Department of Justice.

Unless otherwise noted, children in *Connection* photos are not from actual abuse and neglect cases.



Subscriptions: \$35 for one year. Subscriptions to *The Connection* are included as part of National CASA Association membership.
 © 2008 by the National CASA Association, 100 W. Harrison, North Tower - Suite 500, Seattle, WA 98119-4123.
 Phone (206) 270-0072 or (800) 628-3233 Fax (206) 270-0078
 Email: theconnection@nationalcasa.org
nationalcasa.org and casanet.org
 All rights reserved.

Speak Up for a Child®

Voices & Viewpoints

Volunteer Voice	inside cover
From the CEO	1
From Our Friends	
Dr. Phil McGraw	3
How My Past Volunteer Experience Continues to Enrich My Life	
Partner Perspective by Daniel L. Cromer	4
Reunited with the Help of an Angel	
Parent Perspective by Gretchen S. Phillips-Fisher	5
A Difficult Journey Home	
Youth Editorial by Janelle A.	7
20 Years Later	
Youth Editorial by Vanessa D.	8
Closing Words from Judge Hatchett	
An Encouraging Word to Parents	29

Special Features & Profiles

Cover Artist	6
Giving the Family a Chance:	
Working Towards Reunification	10
Youth Poem	26

Regular Features

Association News	15
Book Club: <i>Three Little Words</i>	18
DVD Review: <i>My Flesh and Blood</i>	19
Resources for Foster Youth:	
Community Involvement and Service Learning	20
Child Welfare News	21
Program Spotlight	23
Field Notes	24
<i>Connection</i> Sightings	28



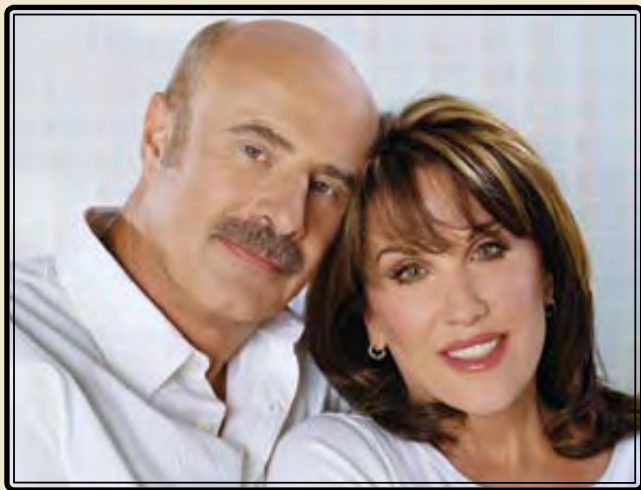
The Connection
 National CASA Association
 100 W. Harrison
 North Tower, Suite 500
 Seattle, WA 98119
 Email: theconnection@nationalcasa.org

We welcome letters, comments and suggestions. The editorial staff of *The Connection* reserves the right to approve all content and submissions. If you do not want your comments to appear in the publication, simply include a line that says, "This letter is not for publication." Advertising inquiries are also welcome. Articles and advertising appearing in *The Connection* do not necessarily reflect the official position of the National CASA Association or its member programs.

Photo Submission Requirements: Please submit your best original photos. Digital photos are often not acceptable for print purposes. *Connection* staff will make every effort to return photos but cannot guarantee their return.

“Those who can, do. Those who can do more, volunteer.”

—Author Unknown



Hello, CASA volunteers! It's Dr. Phil and Robin here with a message of gratitude from our hearts to yours.

When we were asked to become involved in the *Forgotten Children Campaign*, we answered “Yes” without a moment's hesitation. Having met so many of you who work so passionately on behalf of these children, we are honored to join your ranks.

We have always made it our mission to raise awareness of people in crisis who are unable to speak for themselves, most especially children.

Today there are over 500,000 boys and girls in the foster care system, many of whom languish without any sense of stability or permanency. Clearly these children often come from very difficult living situations, and once they are displaced, every fear, emotion and vulnerability they feel is magnified. The loving care you bring by giving them personal attention is invaluable. You know and we know what is at stake for these kids.

It is largely because of the sacrifice we see so many of you making that Robin and I wanted to do what we could do to support you in that effort, by doing what we can to bring much-needed attention to National CASA's *Forgotten Children Campaign*.

Last year, nearly 60,000 volunteer advocates from across the country were paired with more than 243,000 children. You made the decision to stand up for a child so they stand a chance. To those of you have opened your hearts, please know that Robin and I are inspired by your unselfish service and willingness to be the eyes and ears of the court and be that child's voice.

But even with all that is being done by you and the many thousands of dedicated child protective caseworkers and the loving,

National CASA has been fortunate to have spokespeople who joined our work as a result of their deep personal commitments to, and understanding of, the needs of abused and neglected children. For example, Judge Glenda Hatchett continues to speak powerfully of the need for more CASA and guardian ad litem volunteers (see page 29).

Early this year, Dr. Phil and Robin McGraw decided to become spokespeople for our Forgotten Children Campaign. Since then, I have come to appreciate their understanding of our work, their thoughtful approach to working with us and their longstanding concern for the well-being of children in foster care. We could not have written a better script for celebrity support of our cause.

—Michael S. Piraino, CEO, National CASA

caring and devoted foster parents, we must acknowledge the system is still overwhelmed. We cannot allow any child to become a face in the crowd, or a number on a file or the one who falls through the cracks.

That is why we are issuing a call to action to encourage others to join with you to increase the number of children paired with a volunteer advocate from 243,000 to at least 300,000 in 2009.

To reach this goal will require each of us working together with state and local programs to recruit and train additional community volunteers to advocate one-on-one for these forgotten children. You have our pledge that we will work with you until many more children in the system have advocates or are placed in safe, permanent homes.

Again, Robin and I consider it an honor and privilege to be associated with National CASA and the *Forgotten Children Campaign*, and it is our mission to ensure that one day, the acronym CASA—and the good work it represents—will become a household word. We thank you and stand with you in this challenge.

—Dr. Phil McGraw

16 Years Later: How My Volunteer Experience Continues to Enrich My Life

Daniel L. Cromer
Legislative Director
Office of Congressman James E. Clyburn (SC), Majority Whip
US House of Representatives

Shortly after completing my undergraduate degree at the University of South Carolina in 1980, I went to work in the South Carolina Governor's Office. I enjoyed my work there very much and learned about virtually every federal program which came into the state. But my role was not really glamorous, even if it was interesting. I knew that to many people across the state I was simply the last signature on a document before they could get their money.

So after a year or so, I decided I wanted to seek a volunteer opportunity which would contribute to my community. I came across a notification from the Richland County Volunteer Guardian ad Litem Project seeking volunteers and decided to look into the program. Little did I know the impact this one decision would have on my life.

The Richland County Guardian ad Litem Project (now known as Richland County CASA) was still new, and it is my recollection I was in the second group of volunteers trained. I do vividly remember there was only one other male in my group, which otherwise consisted of about 12 women from ages 21 to 60. At the time I thought the training provided was very thorough, although I am quite sure by today's standards it would appear rather rudimentary.

I am a political scientist by professional training, and I had absolutely zero exposure to child abuse and neglect issues. Needless to say, I was

aghast at what I learned in the training sessions. I had no idea whatsoever of the extent of this malady in our society.

Shortly after completion of the training I received a call from the guardian ad litem office asking me to accept a case. To this day I still chuckle to myself when I remember that each case I was asked to accept over the eight years I volunteered was described to me as "a simple case." None were simple. The child in this case was at a local safe shelter. I remember clearly how nervous I was driving to the shelter—and even more so once I sat down with the child. True to my training though, I sat there with stoic emotion as this 9-year-old child described to me how his mother beat him with an electrical cord and cut him with a knife. I maintained this stoicism even as I looked at his wounds, but when I left the shelter I thought I would be physically ill. My first day in court for this child was another gut-wrenching experience, primarily because I did not know what to expect. The case ended with the child being united with relatives and treatment for the mother.

Over the years I accepted many cases, some of which were more complicated than others. I am very proud to say that in all those years and all those cases I never had a judge rule against my recommendation. The responsibility of the guardian is immense because it is literally a life-and-death decision which she or he takes before the bench. I never entered it lightly.



There was one case in particular which I carry to this day. The child was 12 years old when the judge appointed me his guardian, and we grew very close over the years. He calls often, as recently as last night, and he will be 32 years old this year.

What I learned in the Guardian ad Litem Project I still use today, even though it has been 16 years since I volunteered. Since that time, I have served as the legislative director for Congressman Jim Clyburn in Washington. I am extremely happy in my work and carry my passion for public service here quite keenly, but Capitol Hill can be a brutal place. When I am confronted with a difficult conversation in trying to negotiate a legislative solution when none of the parties are in agreement, I remember my days as a guardian ad litem. There are very few, if any, things in life one will discuss with anyone more difficult than talking to them about taking their children away from them. That remembrance helps me keep my job here in perspective.

Over the years many people have said to me, "Being a guardian ad litem must be terribly rewarding." My response was always the same: "I have cried a river over some of these kids. But it is the most enriching thing I have ever done in my life." 📩

Reprinted with permission from the fall 2008 edition of Volunteer Voices, a publication of the South Carolina Guardian ad Litem Program.

Reunited with the Help of an Angel

Gretchen S. Phillips-Fisher



Gretchen with children Symphony and Tyler

She had been chosen. Sandy had been sent as a voice for my daughter: an angel, a CASA volunteer.

When my daughter Symphony was three months old, she was diagnosed with shaken baby syndrome, resulting in developmental delay and sensory disorder. It was the most horrific of all nightmares. My daughter was in this condition because I chose to leave her in the hands of my husband, her father, while I returned to work.

Symphony, now 2½ years old, suffers from severe brain injury and has undergone surgeries on her eyes as well as her brain. She lives much of her brave little life in a wheelchair and cries through extensive therapies four days a week. Symphony has two shunts installed in her brain to keep her alive.

When Symphony was diagnosed, she was also taken away from the one person who loves her more than life itself: me, her mother.

I desperately needed help. For eight months, my daughter was placed in a specialized foster home for children with special medical needs. Child Protective Services blamed me for allowing this to happen to my daughter. No one would listen to me as I tried to tell them I did not know that my husband, the man who not only fathered my daughter but had been a father figure to my son, had shaken my baby. I was told by one of my caseworkers that all of my parental rights would be taken away and my daughter

would be placed for adoption *with someone who would love her.*

"I love her!" I exclaimed. But it seemed they had no time to listen to what I had to say.

One lonely night, I fell to my knees and asked God to send me an angel. I felt I could not handle my situation anymore. I needed help. I needed someone to listen to what I had to say.

The very next day, I received a phone call from a woman named Sandy Spencer. She told me that she was a CASA volunteer and wanted to meet with me to talk about my daughter. At the time, I didn't know what a CASA was or even what the acronym stood for. I agreed to meet with her that very afternoon.

Sandy came to my house and sat down. I felt such a calming presence while with her. She asked me to talk about what had happened. So I did. I told her everything. Do you know what she did? *She listened!* Here was a woman who took the time to get to know me. She took the time to get to know my daughter and to talk with all of my family members—even my husband, who was incarcerated at the time for harming my Symphony. She spoke with Symphony's therapists and caseworkers as well as obtained police reports. She met with Symphony's pediatrician and requested all of her medical history. These records indicated that numerous medical visits leading up to that terrible day when Symphony was shaken had not indicated any sign of mistreatment.

In court, Sandy called attention to important details that others overlooked. For example, during one hearing, a caseworker indicated that since the baby food that was sent along for me to feed Symphony during our visits was returned with the diaper bag, I must not be feeding my baby. No one was there from the agency who had supervised any visits, and I had been advised by my attorney not to speak. Sandy took the stand and confidently explained that the situation showed a lack of communication—not a lack of parenting skills. It was because I wanted to contribute to my daughter's needs that I always took *my own* baby food, diapers, toys and bottles for visits. Sandy told the judge that each time she observed a visit, I fed my daughter. She also noted that I took the time to learn Symphony's therapies and I was doing what I had been taught.

With her final report to the court, Sandy included documentation and was prepared with notes to answer any questions from the judge. When thanking Sandy for her report, the judge commented that it had "shed new light" on our family situation.

Soon after, we had the most blessed day. Symphony was returned home! And shortly after that, our Child Protective Services case was closed. Today, Symphony, Tyler and I have the best relationship ever. She's doing wonderfully and has learned how to crawl. And there is hope that someday she will be able to walk. My

[continued on page 6]

children truly are miracles sent from heaven.

I continue to keep in touch with our CASA director and enjoy speaking about our experience. And Sandy is not our CASA anymore; but we hope she will remain in our lives as our friend. We'll always be grateful for everything she's done for us. Sandy is the angel I was asking for. 📖

Gretchen Phillips-Fisher worked with the elderly in nursing settings for seven years before Symphony's injuries. Today, she volunteers for the United Way and the Children's Miracle Network to publicly speak about the aftermath of shaken baby syndrome. She also supports the volunteer recruitment efforts of her local CASA program in Pennsylvania. For more information about the state's CASA network, contact Dennis Hockensmith, executive director of the Pennsylvania CASA Association, at dennishockensmith@pacasa.org or visit pacasa.org.

Cover Artist



Angel Adams and her self-portrait

Angel D. Adams of Anchorage, AK, 20, has been drawing since age 10. After being in the foster care system as far back as she can remember, Angel was adopted at age 16 by Ricky and Mechele Adams along with her younger brother.

Until being placed with the Adamses at 13, Angel recalls being "bounced around from house to house with no regard for the negative impact it was having on us. So when I really started getting into drawing, I found something that nobody could take away from me. I found my 'thing,' and it became sort of an escape route away from the mess."

An art major at the University of Alaska Anchorage, Angel says, "Throughout the years, art has truly been a way of expressing who I am. Whether it is drawing, painting, sculpting, designing, beading, dance, acting or singing, I put my all into it and do my best to make it unique."

Angel feels tremendously blessed to have such a great family. She states, "Running across a family such as mine is a one-in-a-million event. I thank God daily."

Angel's mother Mechele has been a volunteer with the Anchorage CASA Program for one year. The program's director, June Haisten, calls Mechele "a great advocate for children."



You are there for a child.

As a CASA volunteer, you understand more than anyone what it means for children to have advocates in their lives.

Please consider a gift in your will and help ensure that future generations of children benefit from your legacy. To find out how you can give for the future, please contact us today.

National CASA Association
100 West Harrison | North Tower, Suite 500
Seattle, WA 98119 | 800-628-3233 ext., 267
plannedgiving@nationalcasa.org | nationalcasa.org

A Difficult Journey Home

Janelle A.

When I was young, life with my mother was good. I used to love going to her job and watching her at work. I remember playing little games with her like “thumb war.” I remember going to daycare and not wanting her to leave me. No matter how I was feeling, I was always glad to see my mom.

But as I got a little older, it seemed like my mom was always stressed out. My brother was getting into trouble at school, and his teachers would call her almost every day.

My mother became very depressed and tired of having to deal with the same problems all the time. It wasn’t hard to notice because she would complain about whatever made her angry and upset—her job, her kids or the landlord. I didn’t understand why she was feeling this way. All I remember is that things were not good and that I felt like my life would probably never be the same.

Too Many Problems

I always knew she loved us, but her spirit was down. She was having so many problems with my brother that she quit her job. My dad wasn’t around, and there is only so much a person can handle. My mother didn’t stop doing her duties as a parent, but she basically didn’t seem to care anymore about having fun with us and making us laugh.

As the days went on my mom started getting worse. She thought we needed a better life than what we had, and the only person she felt that could give that to us was my aunt Gina, her closest sister.

One day a worker from ACS (child welfare) showed up. Later, I found

out that a counselor at my brother’s school had called ACS because she misunderstood what my mother meant when she said she was fed up and couldn’t take it anymore.

In Care, with Questions

The day we left home I had no clue what was going on. My mother wasn’t around, and I was just scared and wanted this whole thing to be over. I remember it was a long drive, and I thought that when we came out of the car I would be in front of my aunt’s building. My mom had been talking about us going there, and that’s where I wanted to be. But I was in front of someone else’s building.

My brother and I stayed at that first foster home for about a month with no problems. I would get phone calls from my mother from time to time. She’d ask me how I was doing, tell me how much she missed me and how she couldn’t wait to see me.

I missed my mom a lot too. I really wondered what she was doing and where she was and what exactly had happened to her that day we got taken away. But I never asked her any of those questions.

A New Life

After a month we moved to my aunt’s house. Life was great. I started going to a new Catholic school, and I loved it. My mother would call sometimes and ask me if I wanted to see her and come home. Of course I said yes, but I really didn’t mean it. I enjoyed being at my aunt’s and wanted to stay there forever. I just didn’t want to make my mom feel bad.

The first time I went to visit my mother, I thought I would be happy to see her, but it was kind of weird. I acted like everything was fine, but I wasn’t really comfortable talking to



my own mother. She was so happy to see us, and she couldn’t stop smiling. We stayed for a little while, then hugged each other and said our good-byes, and that was it.

My mother visited us on holidays and birthdays, which was great, but I felt more distance towards her, like I didn’t want to see her at all. I knew it wasn’t right, but that’s how I felt. I didn’t show it or tell anyone.

Back to the Past

After three years at my aunt’s house, she told us it was time for us to leave. I couldn’t accept the fact that I was going to be coming home to my mother and living the life I left behind. I had my life here—my friends, my school and everything else—and now I had to leave it.

It was very hard readjusting to my mother and my new life. My mother seemed so happy to finally have us back. She’d made many changes while my brother and I were gone. I think one of the biggest changes she made was with her anger. My mother used to get so angry whenever someone would give her attitude. She would yell at the top of her lungs while cussing them out. But since we’d left, it seemed like she’d learned how to control that. She seemed calmer, like she was at peace with herself.

Talking Back

I started not to care about a lot of things that my mother told me to do or not to do. I didn’t listen to her or give her any respect. I started talking back and arguing with her all the time. I guess since I’d been gone for

[continued on page 8]

a while I thought the only person I should be listening to was my aunt. I knew my mother had the right to give me rules and tell me what to do, but I just didn't feel like listening.

My mother didn't know what to do with my brother and me because we were both being so disrespectful toward her. She said she wasn't going to give up on us again; she was going to find some way to solve this problem. And she did.

Learning to Listen

She took all of us to family counseling, which I thought was stupid at first. I didn't think it would work. When we got to our first session I was nervous. I just wanted to leave and go home, but I couldn't. So I sat there and listened to my mother talk to the therapist. Everything she was saying was true. My mom seemed not at all uncomfortable telling her business, but I was. I didn't know the therapist at all, and I really didn't want to tell her anything.

But each day we went there I felt more comfortable and open. The therapist was nice, and we each got

a chance to say what we were feeling to one another. It took me a while, but once I got to talking I couldn't stop. I told the therapist the problems I was having with my mom and everything else about myself.

As the years went by I started noticing a change in myself as well as my mother. We were getting along much better and talking to each other. In therapy, my mother was getting a better understanding of how my brother and I felt, and I got a better understanding of how she felt. Being able to talk out our problems without yelling at one another made a big difference. We started really listening to each other, and we were gaining back the bond we once had.

Appreciating Each Other

It's been seven years now since I came home, and my mother and I have a fun relationship. We play around with one another all the time, making jokes and laughing hard at whatever we think is funny. I love my mother a lot, and I feel like the older I get the more I'm starting to appreciate her.

I really love talking to her, and she understands me. My mother is a strong woman who has dealt with a lot of s--t in her life and somehow gotten out of it. I see her as a good person to look up to, even though she doesn't think she is. She tells me all the time that she's made so many mistakes in her life and that I should learn from them.

My mom thinks I don't listen to her when she tells me things, but I am listening in my own way. I know when I get older I'll look back and know exactly what she meant. I don't always show my appreciation, but I know I'm lucky to have a mother like her.

In the past I felt like I would never be able to forgive my mother for putting me through all this. But now that I'm older, I can accept the fact that it happened and move on with my life, each day at a time.

Janelle was 17 when she wrote this story. She currently lives with her mother in Brooklyn, NY. Janelle's last name is withheld by request. © 2008 Youth Communication. Reprinted from the March/April 2008 issue of Represent magazine with permission. Visit youthcomm.org for more powerful stories from youth who have experienced the child welfare system.

20 Years Later

Vanessa D.

My essay below is based on my reunification experience after exiting foster care. These are the issues that the social workers, psychologists or child welfare administrators may not be able to help you address. In child welfare, they talk a lot about reunification and what it means to emancipated youth. Some young people are fortunate enough to be reunified with their birth families before they age out, and others find that after they age out they are welcomed into their old neighborhoods, homes and biological families. So

what happens when it's not that way, when young people age out of foster care and they still don't have a good relationship with their birth parents?

This is an issue that as an alum of foster care I am currently dealing with. I find myself wondering how and where to balance my birth family into my current life. A part of me wants my biological mother in my life out of guilt, because as some would say, "She brought me into this world and without that, I wouldn't be here." However, another part of me says she doesn't deserve my time because she



hasn't made important changes, and incorporating her back into my life means bringing all the other baggage I've been trying so hard to dump.

Many young people aging out of foster care have to deal with these issues, which bring about emotions such as guilt, frustration and confu-


sion. Although reunification is hoped for and is thought to be good, it may not be good for all situations. If the biological family still is in the same unhealthy environment and presents the same issues, then it may be best that the young person choose to either not have a relationship or perhaps have one that has limits and expectations. I've chosen the latter with my biological family because my mother has chosen to remain in the same situation as when I was removed 20 years ago.

I was successful as an alum because I had a lot of adult mentorship and support. I was fortunate to have social workers on my case who saw me as a

person, and not just a case, and were willing to fight for my best interest. I also was blessed to be placed in a foster home with a loving foster mother who saw me not as a temporary stay where she received a paycheck every month for caring for me but rather as her own child. I remained in her care throughout my time in foster care, which is a rare occurrence considering that so many young people are bounced from foster home to foster home.

My formula for success in foster care is home stability, school stability, supportive adults and a sense of normality. These are all of the things that helped me to not only be successful in terms of education but

to learn how to deal with life's challenges such as reunification issues with my biological family.

The following essay illustrates my daily struggle with choosing where and if my biological family should fit into my life, 20 years later. 

Vanessa spent over 10 years in foster care with Casey Family Programs. She earned her bachelor's degree in public relations and her master's degree in social work. Vanessa has worked for the Child Welfare League of America and the state of Texas. Currently, she serves on the Texas State Strategy Board, a collaboration between Child Protective Services and Casey Family Programs. Vanessa is also a member of Foster Care Alumni of America. Her last name is withheld by request.

I aged out of the child welfare system defying many of the statistics and stereotypes that plague alumni of foster care. You've heard them: less likely to receive a bachelor's degree, higher chance of being homeless than the general population and so on. I not only obtained a bachelor's degree but went on to get my master's as well. Due to my background and involvement in advocacy efforts in the system, I was very well connected to various resources, being the "poster alum" if you will. I also maintained a wonderful relationship with my foster family, who continue to provide for me and support me even today.

In addition, I have a strikingly wonderful relationship with the child welfare agency I was with while in care. So then what's my issue? Why do I feel so lost, disconnected, confused and still angry when I was the poster alum? I mean considering my circumstances, one couldn't ask for better outcomes, right?

I am still harboring ill feelings against my birth mother, and they just won't go away. Here I am an adult now, no social worker to monitor or supervise my visits with her. It is now solely my decision as to whether or not I see her. You see, my biological mother was an alcoholic and was in an abusive relationship, and nearly 20 years after I was removed, she still is. Still gripping the same beer can, her favorite Schlitz Malt Liquor, still enduring the same abuse at the hands of the same man.

This is the environment I have to look forward to whenever I decide to visit, 20 years later. I still don't know whether I'll come and find her sober or in a drunken state,

slurring about how she tried so hard, and how sorry she is for everything as the guilt of it all eats at her very being.

I still don't know 20 years later whether I'll come and hear the obscene and emotionally abusive comments that her lover makes toward her, abuse that has taken place so long that it not only has affected her state of mind but her physical state as well. You see, my mother doesn't even sit up straight; she has developed a hunch in her back and refuses to look most folks in the eye during a conversation.

So you see my dilemma here. If I reconnect with her, then I reconnect with that. I reconnect with my past and the abuse. When I visit her, I revisit the memories, I revisit him. Him, the man who sexually abused my oldest sister at age 12 in the same room and bed that we both shared. If I go back, those are the memories that resurface, so clear, so vivid, it's almost as if I am that vulnerable 4-, 5-, 6-, 7- and 8-year-old all over again, even 20 years later.

I don't know what I will do about the relationship with my biological mother. Most times I try to block her out, ignore the fact that she even exists, that that part of me exists. You see it's easier then; and just when I think it's working, I get the phone call. On the other end, it's her in her drunken state disrupting the idea that I have at last escaped every part of her, of those 20 years. She asks how I am doing, questions when I am coming to see her again, reminds me that my niece asks about me.

Oh the guilt...the inner turmoil... I am faced with the question once again. Should I go see her? 20 years later....

—Vanessa D.

Giving the Family a Chance: Working Towards Reunification

Lisette Austin

Had you asked Andrea Goin 13 months ago if she thought the child she was advocating for would be returned to a birth parent, she would have answered no—without hesitation. After a year, neither birth parent had succeeded in getting off drugs, and their lives were worsening. The courts were moving towards termination of parental rights and adoption of the girl.

Goin is director of Henderson County CASA in Henderson, KY and also carries one case as a volunteer during her time away from work. She felt it was important in this case for a sibling to also be adopted into the same family. To allow this to happen, Goin and the child's therapist secured an extension before parental rights were terminated, which proved to be the extra time the birth mother needed. The mother entered a treatment program and did so well with sobriety that she was hired by the same treatment center—a good job with benefits. She paid off court fees and regained her driver's license.

"Last winter I realized she was going to make it, so I quickly switched gears and started working towards reunification," says Goin. The child was recently returned to her mother, and her older sister will soon join her.

Family reunification, as related to child welfare, is the process of returning children to their original families once the home is made safe. A common misperception is that foster care and by default CASA/GAL volunteer advocacy are focused on taking children away from

families and finding them new, "better" homes. The reality is that the majority of children in foster care do end up returning home. According to estimates from the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System, 54% of children who exited foster care during 2002 were reunited with their original families.

Family Reunification Is a Priority

Prevention of removal and family reunification are legal priorities when a child initially becomes involved in the child welfare system. These priorities are rooted in the 1980 Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act as well as the 1997 Adoption and Safe Families Act. The two laws require

that "reasonable efforts" be made to ensure that no child is placed in foster care who can be protected in his or her own home, and that when removal is necessary, reunification always be attempted.

The Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978 (ICWA), specific to American Indian/Alaska Native children and families, contains even stronger stipulations and language around keeping original families together. Studies in the 1970s found that 25-35% of all Indian children

had been removed from families and placed in non-Indian care. These findings led to national concern and eventually to creation of the Indian Child Welfare Act. ICWA requires proof by clear and convincing evidence for any temporary foster care placement and proof beyond a reasonable doubt for termination of parental rights.



"When a case comes into court and a child is alleged to be abused or neglected, the first question is whether social services has made reasonable efforts to prevent removal and ensure the child's safety through provided services," explains retired Judge J. Dean Lewis. "If the answer is yes, the next goal is to immediately assess what services need to be in place for the child and family to be reunified and the child to be kept safe," she says. Lewis is a former member of National CASA's board of trustees, past president of the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (NCJFCJ) and now serves as editor of *The Judges' Page*, the online newsletter published by National CASA and NCJFCJ.

"From day one, child welfare workers need to be thinking about reunification—it's the number one permanency option," agrees Millicent Williams. Williams is a consultant on child welfare issues who has been a social worker in the field for the past 33 years, most recently serving as foster care program director for the Child Welfare League of America. "Kids belong with their families and in their original homes if they can be made safe."

Williams stresses that family reunification is not a one-time event; it is an ongoing process. There are usually many steps that need to be taken and many potential pitfalls. In 2006, the Child Welfare Information Gateway (CWIG) published *Family Reunification: What the Evidence Shows*. This report focuses on practices and interventions that support the reunification process, outlining some of their common characteristics. These characteristics include assessment and case planning, family engagement and service delivery. The report also lists a number of barriers to reunification including lack of parent involvement (particularly of the father), lack of caseworker communication with birth parents about expectations and lack of caseworker support of birth parent efforts to achieve reunification.

CASA volunteers are in a unique position to help facilitate the family reunification process. Volunteers spend considerable time in direct contact with the child and family, carrying caseloads of one or two cases so that they have time to thoroughly investigate all permanency options and their impacts. Because of this, they often play a key role in successful reunification strategies.

"There are four core CASA responsibilities—to gather information, facilitate, advocate and monitor," says Judge Lewis. "Because of these responsibilities, CASA is often in the best position to research the case history, bring family and caseworkers together and help establish and monitor the service delivery plan."

Assessment and Case Planning

Assessing the needs of children and families as they enter the child welfare system, and making plans to address those needs, is critical when working towards reunification goals. This is where the volunteer advocate's responsibility of information gathering kicks into gear.

"First the CASA volunteer gathers facts to ascertain firsthand the child's needs and wishes, and all additional information needed by the court," says Lewis. "The volunteer interviews everyone who may have information about the child's health, safety and best interest."

Volunteer advocates are also instrumental in ensuring that early, comprehensive assessments of the child and family are completed and delivered to the judge.

"Advocates can find out if assessments are being done in the areas of mental health, substance abuse, etc.," says Williams. "The question is, 'what needs to change so that the child can be safe?'" She also recommends that research include speaking to relatives and community members—those who best know and understand the child and parents.

[continued on page 12]

Tips for Advocates

1. Beware of assumptions. Leave your preconceived notions outside and pay attention to the strengths of the family.
2. There are myths about how various ethnic and socioeconomic groups tend to parent. Be aware of your cultural biases.
3. The fundamental belief governing child welfare policy is that the most desirable place for a child is with the family. Try to avoid thinking that you need to rescue the child from the family.
4. View foster care as a time of healing growth for both the child and the parent so they can come together and be a family again.
5. Don't automatically believe what you read about the case. Learn the facts and develop your own impressions. Go into the home and see what's really going on. Talk to Mom and Dad.
6. Find out who is part of the family's support system. Learn from them what might help the family reunite.
7. The longer a child is out of the home, the lower the chance that reunification will succeed. From day one, start finding ways to help strengthen the family.
8. There is a reason that National CASA standards limit the number of cases you can take at any given time (two unless an exception is justified and documented). Honor that limit so you have time to be there for the children and families you are working with.

Tips are drawn from interviews and research by the cover story author.

Lewis stresses the importance of advocates researching community resources available to the family. "CASA volunteers are doing the legwork and telling the judge what services are available in the family's community," she says. "The CASA is key in helping to establish the service delivery plan." Lewis remembers a case where no one realized that the mother had serious mental delays. It was the CASA volunteer who figured out that the mother previously had received services to address her special needs.

"I couldn't tell because the mother was high functioning," Lewis explains. "Because of this discovery, appropriate services were obtained which greatly helped the family and case."

Engaging the Family Through Facilitation

The second core responsibility of a CASA volunteer is facilitation. "It is always in the child's best interest for the parties involved to come to a consensus on as many issues as possible," says Lewis. In order to do this, an advocate can help facilitate meetings involving family members, caseworkers, foster parents and service providers. These meetings can help resolve disputes around issues that may or may not have been brought up in court.

"Often these facilitations reduce the number of additional court hearings which might otherwise be necessary to resolve interim disputes," says Lewis.

Resources on Family Reunification

The following websites, publications and organizations are helpful in understanding issues and strategies surrounding family reunification as related to the child welfare system.

Child Welfare Information Gateway—Family Reunification (childwelfare.gov/permanency/reunification)

This section of the Child Welfare Information Gateway website includes a list of resources specific to family reunification. Resource lists are broken down into topic areas that include: engaging parents in reunification, reunification assessment, reunification with substance-abusing parents and preventing reentry.

Evaluation of Family Preservation and Reunification Programs (<http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/evalfampres94>)

This project, conducted from 1994 through 2002, was intended to rigorously evaluate programs designed to prevent the placement of children in foster care when it can be avoided. A related effort to reunify families who had at least one child placed in foster care was also evaluated, and related issue papers on family preservation, fiscal reform and cost estimation were produced. Westat, Chapin Hall Center for Children and James Bell Associates conducted the evaluation and wrote the reports.

"Family Reunification"

This 2004 article was written by Fred Wulczyn and published in the journal *Children, Families and Foster Care*. It is primarily a discussion of family reunification in the law, in policy and in practice as well as an analysis of family reunification trends in six states. This article is available in PDF format at futureofchildren.org/usr_doc/6-wulczyn.pdf.

Family Reunification: What the Evidence Shows

This 2006 issue brief, published by the Child Welfare Information Gateway, was developed in partnership with the Child Welfare League of America, under subcontract to the National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect. The brief includes a review of research and policies to bring together current information on family reunification with examples of promising practices. It is available at childwelfare.gov/pubs/issue_briefs/family_reunification.

"Judicial Oversight of Parent Visitation in Family Reunification Cases"

This 2003 article was written by Judge Leonard Edwards and published in the *Juvenile and Family Court Journal*. It explores the issue of visitation between a child and parents in the context of child protection proceedings. It is available at childrensprogram.org/media/pdf/Len_Edwards.pdf.

Making Reasonable Efforts: A Permanent Home for Every Child

This report was published in 2000 by the Youth Law Center and developed with support from the Clark Foundation. It includes guidelines for attorneys, judges and child welfare agencies as well as a list of resource organizations and internet resources. The report is available at familyrightsassociation.com/bin/white_papers-articles/reasonable_efforts.

National Resource Center for Family-Centered Practice and Permanency Planning (hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp)

This resource center focuses on increasing the capacity and resources of state, tribal and other publicly supported child welfare agencies to promote family-centered practices that contribute to the safety, permanency and well-being of children while meeting the needs of their families. The center has an online resource list specific to the topic of family reunification available at hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/info_services/reunification.html.

The Judges' Page Newsletter (nationalcasa.org/JudgesPage)

This online newsletter is published by National CASA and the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges and is an excellent resource for CASA volunteers. The October 2007 issue, *Reasonable Efforts in the Dependency Courts*, addresses the role of the judge in making reasonable efforts findings as well as provides the perspective of others involved in foster care cases. This issue can be downloaded from *The Judges' Page* newsletter website.





Facilitation is also the cornerstone to one of the main intervention strategies laid out in the CWIG report on reunification—family engagement. According to the report, effective family engagement activities include involving birth families in planning and decision-making, encouraging foster parent support of the birth parents and facilitating visits between children in foster care and their parents.

“CASA advocates can request and encourage what is called a family team meeting that includes birth parents, the child and family members,” says Williams. “This ensures the parent is not left out of the parenting process just because the child is in foster care.”

Social workers commonly support a connection between birth parents and foster parents. “I think it is important that the birth parents meet the foster parents early on, so that birth parents don’t feel replaced and so that foster parents can serve as mentors,” Williams explains. “Unfortunately many states still feel that foster parents and birth parents shouldn’t have contact at all—this is contrary to what is helpful to the child,” she says. “What better way to comfort the child than to show the foster parent and birth parent working together?”

The volunteer advocate can help facilitate visitation between children and birth parents. “Visitation is critical,” says Williams.

According to the CWIG report on reunification, parental visitation statistically increases the chances of families being reunited. Regular visitation also reassures the child, who may be feeling guilty about being removed and worrying about his or her parents.

Additionally, visitation is a time for advocates to see parents in action. “It’s important to use visitation as a laboratory, so to speak,” says Williams. She also believes it is an opportunity to see how the child and parent interact—and what kinds of resources the parent needs.

Retired Judge Leonard Edwards agrees that visitation provides an excellent opportunity for learning about the family. Edwards, like Lewis, is a former member of National CASA’s board and past president of NCJFCJ. He spent many years on the bench in California and has authored articles on family reunification and parental visitation.

Social workers or parent aides often use visitation as a time to encourage and guide birth parents in their interactions with children. However Judith Parr, a volunteer advocate with Henderson County CASA in Kentucky, sometimes takes this on while she is observing a visit. “Sometimes all they need is for someone to come alongside and say ‘you don’t have to shout at this child—let me show you a different way,’” Parr says. “Parenting classes are helpful and are often ordered by the court, but sometimes parents just need some real-life reinforcement while they are visiting their children.”

Advocacy and Monitoring

The CWIG report states, “targeted services meeting the individualized needs of children and families are key to achieving family reunification and ensuring children’s safety.” CASA volunteers can advocate for children in the child welfare system in ways that social workers often cannot.

“The CASA is not bound by agency policy or budgets in recommending what is best for the child,” says Lewis. Their focus is on children and what is best for them—which often means advocating for services families need to achieve reunification. “Because the CASA volunteer is a member of the community, he or she also often has access to charitable resources that agencies are unaware of.”

Along with advocating for services specific to each case, such as substance abuse or mental health treatment for parents, volunteers can also be instrumental in raising awareness about general service needs in the community. “Advocates are often the ones who see what services are lacking—they can really help push for services that need to be developed,” says Williams.

Lastly but very importantly, the CASA volunteer closely monitors the case over time, making recommendations to

[continued on page 14]

the judge and ensuring that all parties are in compliance with the court's orders. "Monitoring is so critical. When something goes wrong, the CASA advocate can bring it to the court's attention by filing a report, and the court can schedule a hearing to address concerns," says Lewis.

Advocate Parr takes this role seriously. "If anything goes wrong, I don't hesitate to tell the courts what is going on," she says. "It really breaks your heart, but you have to do it."

Concurrent Planning

Although family reunification is a top priority when a child enters the welfare system, it is not always possible. "Concurrent planning" is a practice in which caseworkers and advocates are simultaneously researching and preparing for two possible outcomes—reunification and long-term placement with a new family.



"At the permanency planning hearing, advocates have to be thinking about alternatives and backup plans," says Judge Lewis. From the beginning of the case, CASA volunteers should keep track of things they learn about the child that might help them if they cannot be reunited with the birth family. "The goal is to develop a permanency plan that will really help the child."

Concurrent planning is not easy, as it requires supporting birth parents while building relationships with foster parents or other relatives in case the birth parent does not meet established goals. "It's a tricky thing—and it takes a lot of skill on the part of the worker or volunteer," says Williams.

Judge Edwards agrees. "Concurrent planning is best practice and a great idea," he says. "But unfortunately it is not carried out in most jurisdictions. Many foster parents don't like the idea of working with the birth parents—some want the parents to 'lose' so they can adopt the child."

Even when reunification seems unattainable, advocates need to remain open to the possibility that things could suddenly change, as in Andrea Goin's case that opened this story. And when it does, the advocacy focus should immediately return to reunification.

"The commitment of the system is to return children to their families," reminds Edwards. "Look to the family first, and don't assume that they're bad people. I'm always trying to inspire and urge people to give the family a chance."

And in the case of the struggling mother who turned her life around and now has two of her children back, she is certainly glad her CASA volunteer did just that. 📣

Lisette Austin is a freelance writer who regularly contributes to local and national publications. Her areas of expertise include foster care, multiracial identity, health disparities and substance abuse research. Along with freelancing, Lisette works part-time as a research coordinator at the University of Washington in Seattle.

Reasonable Efforts Questions

Before making reasonable efforts findings, the court should ask the following questions:

- Are the services being offered targeted to the particular needs of the child and family and focused on the problems that led to the finding of abuse or neglect?
- What services could be rendered that would prevent the child's removal and ensure the child's safety?
- If removal is ordered, what services will promote reunification and maintain child safety?
- If removal is ordered, are there relatives or an absent parent who could care for the child and, if so, what services need to be offered to the caretaker?
- If reunification is not an option, what services need to be in place to achieve permanency for the child?
- Has a professional assessed the child's and the family's mental health, developmental and substance abuse status?
- What barriers exist to the child and family's use of the offered services? Barriers may include transportation, childcare, language skills, hearing impediments, disabilities and educational deficits.
- Are the services being offered culturally competent?
- Are the services needed by the child and family available in the community, or can the services be contracted through an outside resource?
- Were appropriate services offered in a timely manner?
- What are the credentials of the service providers, and have the outcomes of such services been evaluated?

CASA/GAL volunteers can assist judges by answering many of these questions in their court report and by informing the court of community resources.

—Excerpted from "The Editor's Page" in the Reasonable Efforts in the Dependency Court issue of The Judges' Page electronic newsletter (nationalcasa.org/judgespage)

Local, State and National CASA Programs Partner at American Legion Convention

National CASA collaborated with the Maricopa County CASA program in Phoenix and Arizona CASA to create an exhibit at the American Legion's annual national convention in Phoenix for five days in August. A team of more than 20 local and state staff members as well as Maricopa County CASA volunteers staffed the booth to increase awareness and recruit CASA volunteers nationally.

The American Legion Child Welfare Foundation is a long-time supporter of National CASA, providing grant funding of volunteer recruitment and training initiatives benefiting the CASA network as a whole. The latest joint project was a new volunteer curriculum toolkit provided to the network in 2007. The philanthropic priority of the foundation is to better the lives of children across the nation by providing nonprofit organizations with a means to educate the public.



American Legion Child Welfare Foundation Deputy Director William Pease visits with (left to right) Maricopa County CASA Program Volunteer Terry Tyner, CASA Coordinator Marisa Laguna-Gonzalez and CASA Coordinator Maggie Sommer at the conference booth.

Besides being an important national outreach opportunity among nearly 11,000 Legionnaires from across the country—an ideal pool of potential volunteers—the convention was a chance to strengthen National CASA's relationship with the foundation. Members of the foundation's board and staff visited the booth, including Deputy Director William Pease. The booth was part of "Foundation Row," a special section of exhibitors consisting of nonprofits the foundation has supported.

Alice Bassett, a volunteer with the local CASA program, said, "When you believe in an organization, it is a pleasure as well as a responsibility to speak on their behalf. This type of event gives a face to the children and the great need for CASAs. Some people were unaware of the many changes children experience while in the foster care system. I was also very excited to learn the number of child advocacy organizations the American Legion supports."

Maggie Sommer, a coordinator of the Maricopa County CASA Program who helped staff the booth, said, "It was a great experience. A veteran and I were chatting about our funding, and before I knew it he sat down and engaged me in a conversation about social services for veterans and sharing general wisdom of life. He knew about CASA, and we were analyzing the difference a CASA volunteer could make in a child's life."



Maricopa County CASA Program Director Rob Hahn with Arizona CASA Program Manager Bonnie Marcus

National CASA Honored as a Top Workplace

For a second time, the National CASA Association was named as a winner of the annual Alfred P. Sloan Awards for Business Excellence in Workplace Flexibility. The national *When Work Works* project recognized 260 winners ranging in size and organization type (businesses, government agencies and nonprofits). Data provided by employers was corroborated by surveys of employees. According to the project organizers, "Each of the honorees represents the best flexible and effective work practices and policies in the nation.... These businesses truly understand that workplace effectiveness and flexibility are part of being an employer of choice today."

According to National CASA Human Resources Director Jill Wiedenhoft, "We're proud to be recognized a second time by the Sloan Foundation. Our employees appreciate a number of our policies in terms of flexibility. I'd say that key among the policies are flexible schedules, supporting staff in working from home when appropriate and welcoming infants up to six months of age to join their parents at work."

In addition, National CASA was one of 65 businesses across Washington state recently honored by the *Puget Sound Business Journal* as finalists for Washington's Best Workplaces.

Back-to-School Backpacks Benefit Foster Youth for Fourth Year

Since 2005, National CASA has been one of five national charity partners in the **Office Depot Foundation** National Backpack program.

Hewitt Associates, a global human resources and consulting firm based in Lincolnshire, IL, provides generous shipping support. In August, backpacks with essential



[continued on page 16]

school supplies were once again distributed to elementary schoolchildren served by local CASA programs across the US.

Lori Derhammer, communications and marketing manager of Georgia CASA, Inc., had this to say about the program: "Foster children often experience so many changes in their lives, including their school routines. The CASA programs in the metro Atlanta area are so appreciative to the Office Depot Foundation for providing backpacks for the past several years to foster children. Even a simple item such as the backpacks, along with the included school supplies, can help these children begin the school year on a very positive note."

To learn more about the foundation's commitment to education, as well as its other programs and initiatives, visit officedepotfoundation.org.



Cindy Booth, executive director of Child Advocates in Indianapolis, with Carl Edwards, driver of the #99 Office Depot Ford Fusion in the NASCAR Sprint Cup Series. Edwards was a special guest of the Office Depot Foundation at the Indianapolis Backpack Donation Day event.

Tribal Recruitment PSAs

In October, National CASA distributed a new radio public service announcement (PSA) to support member CASA/GAL programs in recruiting American Indian/Alaska Native volunteers. The PSA is part of a larger diversity recruitment campaign funded by the Office Depot Foundation that also includes radio ads in Spanish aimed at bilingual individuals and an African-American spot featuring National CASA spokesperson Judge Glenda Hatchett.

Special outreach to American Indians and Alaska Natives is critical because while their children make up just 2% of children in the foster care system, they are overrepresented by more than 2:1 based on their share of the overall population. In 2007, 1% of our volunteers nationwide were American Indian (fewer than 600 out of nearly 60,000). Yet there are over 10,000 children of this heritage in foster care. Recruitment support is critical not just in the 15 areas where there are specific Tribal Court CASA programs but also in every community where there are significant numbers of Native Americans.

Radio was chosen because past recruitment experience has demonstrated that radio is a productive, low-cost way to reach individuals of color. The innovative spot features music, percussion and the voice of storyteller, artist and musician Bunny Swan Gease (see sidebar), who was brought to National CASA's attention by Victoria Segura Kelly of the Kenaitze Indian Tribal CASA Program in Kenai, Alaska.

National CASA's marketing agency, Publicis, created the PSA and worked closely with Tribal Court CASA representatives to identify radio stations that reach significant percentages of local tribal communities. You can hear a sample PSA at nationalcasa.org; from the home page, click on "News & Events."

The next issue of *The Connection* will focus on meeting the needs of American Indian/Alaska Native children and families involved in the child welfare system.

Reflections from Alaska Native Artist Bunny Swan

I became aware of CASA through my mother, Clare Swan, who has been a Tribal Court judge and done advocacy work for children for the last 20 years. She's worked with CASA programs, helping young people to find their way. In our tribal community, the CASA program is very important and well supported.

As a Kenaitze tribal member, I'm a culture bearer, which means I'm a spokesperson for the Alaska Native culture. I'm an artist of many mediums, but my first love is music. It's a gift to be able to create music and artful things incorporating many of our traditional Alaska Native materials.

I was very happy to contribute to CASA programs around the country by recording this volunteer recruitment PSA. It is important for youth and their supporters to know that CASA programs are available to them just about everywhere in the country. Our young people are our tomorrow. We've got to invest in them in every way. Every child who doesn't have a voice needs one. There's not much an adult can do that is more valuable—especially in a difficult situation.

I hope that when people hear this PSA on the radio, it moves them. We did it with percussion, voice and music, and I think the music is intriguing enough that people will say, "Whoa, what was that?" And before they know it, they're dialing up CASA. I have a hunch that's how it will work.

—Bunny Swan Gease



Bunny Swan celebrates winter with a friend. Her latest CD features a story about Ggugguyni, a raven, and a snow goose. "It's got love, action, adventure and cultural relevance," according to Swan. "It includes fairly contemporary music, drumming and song." To learn more about the artist, visit bunnyswan.com.

Tribute on the Passing of the 2000 National CASA Volunteer of the Year

Trudy Strewler
Executive Director
CASA of the Pikes Peak Region
Colorado Springs, CO

I first came to know of Dick Milton over 16 years ago when I read his application to become a CASA volunteer. I felt a little overwhelmed and intimidated when I learned he had been a Foreign Service officer and deputy assistant director of the US Arms Control and Disarmament Agency. I wondered how we could provide training and experience rich enough to engage him. I also wondered why CASA?

Dick shared in the interview that his Foreign Service work had been very meaningful, but more global, and as he retired he wanted to directly affect outcomes for children in our community. Which he surely did!

During and after training, Dick fully engaged, attending almost every in-service training; assisting with training and mentoring volunteers; becoming our interpreter for Spanish-speaking families; and, most importantly, serving 34 children as an advocate with incredible results.

Most of those children were still in contact with Dick, and many came home to visit before his passing. They loved, admired and respected Dick, often looking to him as a role model...most called him "Grandpa."

When I think of Dick, I see him walking into the office with newspaper clippings in-hand. He would arrive every few weeks with an article or two about child welfare, copy it and write a note. The note would read: "Trudy, what is CASA going to do about this?" Within a few days I would receive a call: "Did you read the article I left? How can we tackle this issue?" he'd ask.

After service on four consecutive CASA cases with sibling groups who were in separate foster home placements, he came to me and said he'd been researching the issue. He had articles in hand and had gone on the internet to find that six



Dick Milton and Trudy Strewler

states had passed legislation to prevent siblings from being separated by placements in foster care and adoptive homes whenever possible. He said Colorado had no such law and that he wanted to work with CASA to draft legislation and find a sponsor for the bill.

And so we did just that. The legislation ran against great opposition, but it passed that same year, 2000. What an incredible legacy Dick has left for all of Colorado's foster children.

Also in 2000, Dick was named National CASA Child Advocate of the Year out of a pool of 53,000 volunteers nationwide.

Dick served on our local Foster Children's Fund Committee since its inception. Recently, the fund was renamed in his honor and is now known as the "Milton Foster Children's Fund." Dick was an amazing human being and a man of great heart, commitment, insight, intelligence, integrity—and boy, what determination!

Last week I ran across one of Dick's news articles in a file. I left it there, as I will all his messages as a reminder to continue to *be the change we want to see in the world*—just as Dick so consistently emulated throughout his life. I am proud to call Dick my friend and friend of CASA.

National CASA Mourns Member of Board of Trustees

National CASA lost a strong advocate for children with the death of Trustee Bob McCarthy on September 14. McCarthy was a partner in the law firm McCarthy Schwartz in San Francisco as well as a lobbyist and political fundraiser. Joining National CASA's board in 2006, he was instrumental in promoting congressional relations as a member of the Education and Public Awareness Committee. He served as co-chair for the campaigns of Senators Dianne Feinstein and Barbara Boxer and hosted a television show, *That's Politics*, as well as a radio show, *California Political Review*. McCarthy was known as a witty raconteur with a high sense of style. He and his wife Suzanne were extremely active with dozens of nonprofit organizations in the San Francisco Bay Area and nationally.



This quarter's "Top Tips for Volunteers" feature has been moved online. Danny Von Kanel, a CASA volunteer with the Youth Service Bureau CASA Program in Covington, LA, provides "6 Tips for Making the Most of Your Supervisor." From nationalcasa.org, click on "Volunteer" and then on "Support for Volunteers." The "Tips" link appears at the top of the right-hand column.



Three Little Words

By Ashley Rhodes-Courter
Nonfiction, Atheneum, 312 pages, 2008,
simonsays.com

Born in 1985, Ashley Rhodes-Courter entered foster care three years later. During the next nine years, she lived in 14 different foster homes. Occasionally, the foster families were loving and supportive; but those stays were abruptly short. Most of the time, the family was abusive or indifferent, and the stay was excruciatingly prolonged. It was a CASA volunteer who helped expose the abuse she was subjected to, led the move to terminate her mother's parental rights and helped her find a loving family when she was 12.

The beginnings of this book date to 2003, when the *New York Times Magazine* held an essay contest that asked students to describe a moment in their lives in which they learned something about themselves. Rhodes-Courter, immediately reminded of her adoption day, wrote the grand prize-winning essay, "Three Little Words." She later expanded the essay into her recently published memoir, *Three Little Words*, which provides the opportunity to examine the child welfare system as viewed by a child. It is a story which can be frustrating and

emotionally draining for the reader; but it is also a story which reveals the author's resilience and precocious spirit.

To begin with, the title, *Three Little Words*, is thought-provoking as it reflects a phrase often tossed out in the volume. Her biological mother always greeted Rhodes-Courter with, "You're my sunshine!" while the adoptive mother proved that "I love you" meant more than words. But to the 12-year-old girl, the three words she mumbled when required to give consent to being adopted—"I guess so"—represented a plethora of raw emotions ranging from angst to rage to apathy: Was she being lifted out of that inferno on earth or merely being taunted by a picture-perfect story ready to fall apart? She felt at the time that she was merely a "boomerang kid," who was being thrown far away only to return to her place of origin.

The story, however, turns out to be one of unexpected fulfillment. Rhodes-Courter experienced nearly 10 years of abandonment in the foster care system. During this time, she estimates that almost 200 people were responsible for some aspect of her case, including 73 child-welfare administrators; 44 child-welfare caseworkers; 19 foster parents; 23 attorneys; 17 psychologists, psychiatrists and therapists; 5 guardian ad litem staff; 4 judges; 4 court personnel; 3 abuse registry workers; 2 primary case workers—and 1 CASA volunteer. Of them all, she remarks, the two who made the greatest difference in her life were unpaid volunteers: Martha Cook, the attorney who worked pro bono on her termination case, and Mary Miller, the CASA volunteer who "got me out of abusive foster homes and ensured that I was on the path to finding a permanent family."

Indeed, it is when CASA volunteer Miller enters her life—and becomes

the first person to ever ask her, "What can I do for you?"—that the reader sees a glimmer of hope. In the end, Rhodes-Courter finds a permanent home with a family that loves her unconditionally and in whose care she blossoms into a mature and responsible adult. Thus, as she constantly reminds her audience in CASA appearances, "I'm living proof of the work that you do and how important it is."

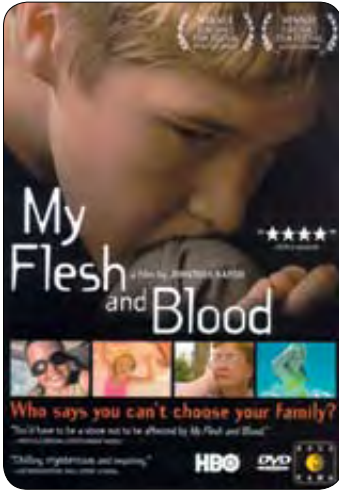
Three Little Words represents in part an indictment of the foster care system, where so many red flags in Rhodes-Courter's case were ignored due either to indifference or negligence. But this experience was mitigated by the fulfillment brought through her adoption by two remark-

[continued on page 19]

Ashley's Remarkable Parents

Gay Courter, Ashley Rhodes-Courter's adoptive mother, is a writer in film, television, fiction and non-fiction, with five best-selling novels to her credit. She has also served for more than 16 years as a volunteer guardian ad litem in Florida. Describing her work as a volunteer, she wrote *I Speak For This Child: True Stories of a Child Advocate*, a book published in 1995 and nominated for a Pulitzer Prize. She received an Emmy for her one-hour television special, *Where's My Chance? The Case for Our Children*. Courter accepted her second Emmy from the National Academy of Arts and Television Sciences, Suncoast Chapter, for a series of public service announcements called *Solutions for America's Children*. In 2005, she and her husband, film director and editor Phil Courter, were recognized by the Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute as *Angels in Adoption*. The couple has produced more than 200 documentary and educational films.

My Flesh and Blood



2003

Running time: 83 minutes
chaikenfilms.com

The documentary *My Flesh and Blood* follows the Tom family for a year. Susan Tom has 14 children. She has adopted 12 of them, most of whom have special needs. The film focuses on the 11 children living at home during the time of filming.

The concept of this film began when director Jonathan Karsh met this remarkable family while working at a local TV station. The family was

scheduled to set off for a two-month road trip across the country two days after their interview with Karsh, who asked Tom if he could join them and begin filming. The film was originally going to be focused on that road trip, but when the family returned home, it was the ins and outs of their daily life that became the focus of the film.

Each child's story that is told on film was told with the consent of the child. The film naturally takes a focus on the children who are more outgoing or need the most care or attention. At times, the viewer is left wanting to know more about the other children.

My Flesh and Blood addresses the importance of attachment at an early age and the challenges of finding services. The film also successfully demonstrates how an adoptive or foster family can include birth parents and help the child maintain a relationship with them.

At one point in the film, oldest child Margaret has a breakdown and is struggling to get her mom to listen. Susan is not able to listen to Margaret because she is already dealing with an

abusive outbreak from Joe at the same time that a caretaker for Joe arrives at the house. Susan appears very cold at this moment, and you wonder how she is able to give enough attention to each of the children.

The film does a nice job of addressing some of the questions that might occur to viewers. What motivates Susan to take on so many children? Does Susan have any help? What do her two oldest boys that are her two birth children think? Is it fair to Margaret, who is starting college, that she has to do so much around the house to help take care of the other children? Questions that aren't answered in the film are addressed in the interviews included among the extra features on the DVD.

The children in the Tom family have a unique outlook on life and take nothing for granted. Susan Tom demonstrates that regardless of the number and the situations of the children in a home, if you give unconditional love, support and hope and are able to provide a permanent home, children can and will thrive. 📺

[Book Club continued from page 18]

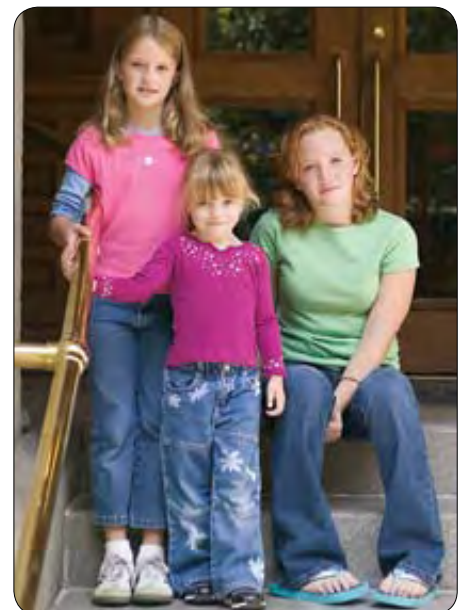
able people, Phil and Gay Courter (see sidebar). They changed the girl's life in ways no one would have initially imagined. Despite the early difficulties, provoked by an ingrained suspicion on her part and a radical accommodation on theirs, they created a family bond which would prove to be stronger than blood.

Recently, with support from her adoptive family, Rhodes-Courter graduated with honors from Eckerd College in St. Petersburg, FL, completing a double major in communications and drama with a double minor in political science and psychology. Today, she

travels around the country as an advocate for adoption and changes in the child welfare system.

In remarks made recently at a CASA luncheon in Kansas City, KS, Rhodes-Courter said, "Children need to get out of the foster care system as soon as possible. We need families as much as we need food and oxygen. Without any of these, we wither and die."

How many of the hundreds of thousands of cases of abused and neglected children can we count today where such a positive outcome arises? That is the CASA volunteer's goal and challenge. 📺



Community Involvement and Service Learning

Getting involved in your community is the perfect way to help others while you learn about the world as well as about yourself. Many youth in foster care are able to establish important connections as they work with others in support of nonprofit organizations and charitable projects. Examples of causes supported by youth are anti-bullying initiatives, environmental/green organizations, homeless outreach projects and safer sex peer education.

Additionally, more and more high schools and colleges around the country are requiring a “service-learning” experience of their students. The National Service-Learning Partnership defines this term as “a teaching method that engages young people in solving problems within their schools and communities as part of their academic studies or other type of intentional learning activity.”

Whether you are working with a young person to explore options for giving back to the community for altruistic reasons or to meet graduation requirements, the following organizations and resources provide a jumping-off point.

The **Corporation for National and Community Service** (nationalservice.gov) engages Americans of all ages and backgrounds in service to meet community needs. Each year, more than 1.5 million individuals help meet local needs through a wide array of service opportunities. These include projects in education, the environment, public safety, homeland security and other critical areas through the corporation’s three major programs: Senior Corps, AmeriCorps and Learn and Serve America. The corporation is part of the USA Freedom Corps.

AmeriCorps VISTA (americorps.org) is the national service program designed specifically to fight poverty. Founded as Volunteers in Service to America in 1965 and incorporated into the AmeriCorps network of programs in 1993, VISTA provides members opportunities to develop new skills, friendships and experiences—plus the satisfaction that comes from helping others. During service, members receive a modest living allowance, health care and other benefits. Upon completing service, members can choose to receive either an education award worth \$4,725 to pay for college or \$1,200 in cash.

Learn and Serve America (learnandserve.org) supports and encourages service learning throughout the US and enables over one million students to make meaningful contributions to their community while building their academic and civic skills. By engaging young people in service learning, the program instills an ethic of lifelong community service. Learn and Serve America provides support to K-12 schools, community groups and higher education institutions to facilitate service learning projects.

Learn and Serve America’s National Service-Learning Clearinghouse (servicelearning.org) is a website supporting the service-learning efforts of schools, higher education institutions, communities and tribal nations. The site offers timely information, thousands of free online resources, the nation’s largest library of service-learning materials, national service-learning email discussion lists as well as reference and technical assistance services.

The **USA Freedom Corps** (usafreedomcorps.gov) website offers “10 Tips for Volunteering Wisely” and allows the user to search for volunteer opportunities by interest area in a local community. Results are provided by Network for Good.


The **National Service-Learning Partnership** (service-learningpartnership.org) is a network of members dedicated to advancing service learning as a core part of every young person’s education. The network consists of more than 10,000 members in all 50 states, including young people, teachers, parents, administrators, policymakers, education leaders, community partners, businesspeople and researchers.

The **National Youth Leadership Council** (nylc.org) links youth, educators and communities to redefine the roles of young people in society. The organization believes that service learning empowers youth to transform themselves from recipients of information and resources into valuable, contributing members of a democracy.

The **International Partnership for Service Learning and Leadership** (ipsl.org) promotes international service learning opportunities. This nonprofit educational organization serves students, colleges, universities, service agencies and related organizations around the world by fostering programs that link volunteer service to academic study. Their website is a portal to semester-abroad programs in a variety of countries.

The **America’s Promise Alliance** (americaspromise.org) promotes the “Five Promises,” which are developmental resources and supports that young people need for success in life. See the website’s section on the fifth promise, opportunities to help others, for more information.

Local **YMCA** associations (ymca.net) provide many volunteer opportunities for middle- and high-school students. Their Earth Service Corps is a national program.

VolunteerMatch (volunteermatch.org) is a leader in the nonprofit world dedicated to helping everyone find a great place to volunteer. Their advanced search feature allows the user to check off issues of personal importance and to find opportunities appropriate to age and location. 

Historic Foster Care and Adoption Legislation Enacted

Since June, National CASA has been very active in Congress, and working with advocates throughout our network, to push for passage of landmark foster care reform legislation. *The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act*, was signed by President Bush on October 7 as PL 110-351. The legislation includes many significant improvements and opportunities for children in the child welfare system, most of which will become effective on January 1, 2009. Goals and major provisions of the legislation follow.

- **Permanent Placement with Relatives.** Grandparents and other relatives willing to become legal guardians for their relative children may be eligible to receive federal assistance at a rate similar to that provided to foster parents. This will result in more permanent, loving homes for children whose family members would have had a financial hardship providing care on a permanent basis.
- **Maintain Connections with Siblings and Family.** If it is in the child's best interest, states must make reasonable efforts to keep sibling groups together in foster, family or adoptive placements. If a child has been approved for permanent placement with a family member, the other siblings may be placed with the family as well. In such cases, federal assistance may be provided for each child as described above. A new *Family Connection* grants program is established, funding information and resources to kinship families, intensive family-finding efforts, family group decision-making and family substance abuse programs.
- **Increase the Number of Adoptions for Waiting Children.** An estimated 127,000 children are waiting for adoptive families. The legislation provides incentive payments to states for every child adopted above 2007 numbers. The incentive is increased for adoptions of children age 9 and older

as well as for children under 9 with special needs.

- **Improve Outcomes and Transition for Older Youth.** Research demonstrates that outcomes for youth who remain in care to age 21 are significantly improved over youth who leave the system at age 18. Beginning October 1, 2010, federal funding becomes available to reimburse states that choose to support foster youth beyond the age of 18 provided that the youth is involved in school, vocational training or employed at least 80 hours per month.
- **Improve Outcomes for American Indian/Alaska Native Children.** Federal foster care assistance has not been available to support foster care services for children on tribal lands except where the tribe has a special agreement with the state. Now federally recognized tribes can directly access Title IV-E funding to support children in care on tribal lands as well as a proportionate amount of Chafee Foster Care Independence Program funds. One-time grants will be available to tribes to develop a foster care plan.
- **Improve Competencies of Individuals Working with Children Involved in the Child Welfare System.** Title IV-E funding will be extended to states to support training of court personnel, attorneys, guardians ad litem and court appointed special advocates. The reimbursement rate starts at 55% in fiscal year 2009, increasing to 60% in 2010, 70% in 2011 and 75% in 2012 and thereafter.
- **Improve Education Stability and Coordination of Medical Needs.** Child welfare agencies are directed to ensure that a child remains in the same school at the time of placement in foster care if it is in the child's best interest. The state may utilize Title IV-E funding for transportation costs to ensure that the child is able to remain in the school of origin. States must also develop a plan for ongoing oversight and coordination of health care services for every child in foster care in collaboration with pediatricians and other experts.

All of these provisions can significantly improve opportunities for our children in care, though it will be several years before we may be able to measure outcomes. It will also require

some time for the US Department of Health and Human Services to develop guidance for states on implementation of many of the measures, particularly the allocation of Title IV-E funds. The legislation can be reviewed at <http://thomas.loc.gov>; enter "HR 6893 ENR" in the search line, then check "search bill number."

Federal Report Provides Key Indicators of Children's Well-Being

Each year since 1997, the Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics has published a report on the well-being of children and families. The forum alternates publishing a detailed report, *America's Children: Key National Indicators of Well-Being*, with a summary version that highlights selected indicators. This year, the forum is publishing *America's Children in Brief*. However each year all indicators and background data are updated on the forum's website (childstats.gov). The indicators and background measures presented in *America's Children in Brief* are chosen because they are easy to understand; are based on substantial research connecting them to child well-being; vary across important areas of children's lives; are measured regularly so that they can be updated and show trends over time; and represent large segments of the population. The indicators are organized into seven sections, each focusing on a domain relevant to children's lives: *Family and Social Environment, Economic Circumstances, Health Care, Physical Environment and Safety, Behavior, Education and Health*. For more information, visit childstats.gov/americaschildren/index.asp.

Child Welfare Outcomes Report

The annual *Child Welfare Outcomes Report* from the US Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) are designed to inform Congress, the states and the public about state

[continued on page 22]


performance on key child welfare outcomes and change in performance over time. The underlying goal of the reports is to promote continuous improvement in the outcomes experienced by children served by child welfare systems throughout the nation. The findings of DHHS's latest report, *Child Welfare Outcomes 2002-2005: Report to Congress*, suggest that although states are improving in some areas with regard to achieving positive outcomes for children who come into contact with state child welfare systems, many challenges remain. The specific issues associated with these challenges will be identified for individual states through the second round of DHHS's Child and Family Services Reviews. The data presented in the *Child Welfare Outcomes Report* may point the way to areas where states are experiencing the greatest challenges. Read the report at acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/pubs/cwo05/index.htm.

New Research Article Published About Ethnic Identity and Youth in Foster Care

The summer issue of *Focus*, a newsletter published by the Foster Family-Based Treatment Association, includes an article discussing the results and recommendations of the Casey Field Office Mental Health Study. The study surveyed 188 youth age 14-17 who received foster care services at one of Casey Family Programs' field offices. "The Ethnic Identity of Foster Youth" was authored by Catherine Roller White, MA, Lovie Jackson, MSW, Anne Havalchak, MPA, Kirk O'Brien, PhD and Peter J. Pecora, PhD. The study found that most youth (69%) wanted to learn more about their ethnic identity. The article concluded with recommendations for helping youth in care explore and connect with their ethnic heritage. To read the article, go to page 4 of ffta.org/members/FOCUS_summer_2008.pdf.

Improving Higher Education Outcomes for Students from Foster Care

A new initiative from Casey Family Programs is aimed at improving access to higher education for foster youth. College is a means for young people to secure good jobs, advance in their careers, achieve economic independence and build social networks. But few students from foster care ever gain access to higher education programs, let alone graduate from college. Only 7-13% of students from foster care enroll in higher education. About 2% obtain bachelor's degrees, in contrast to 24% of adults in the general population. Youth in foster care often report that few people in their lives

ever expected them to attend and succeed in college. These students seldom receive the kind of guidance and support needed to prepare for higher education. Too often, young adults aging out of foster care face unemployment, underemployment and homelessness. Casey Family Programs' framework—*Supporting Success: Improving Higher Education Outcomes for Students from Foster Care*—provides program development tools for college counselors, administrators, professors and staff. It helps education professionals define a plan for improving their institutions' support for students from foster care. To order this publication free of charge or read it online, go to casey.org and search for "Supporting Success." 



Item #	Description	Price
7032	Clear Glass CASA Ornament	\$7.95

ShopCASA.org

Metro Atlanta CASA Programs Work Together to Recruit and Train Volunteers

Carlene Redmond, Director, Cobb County CASA, Marietta, GA and
Lori Derhammer, Communications and Marketing Manager, Georgia CASA



Graduates of the Atlanta metro-wide pre-service volunteer training class were sworn in on December 13, 2007 at the Fulton County Juvenile Court. The 38 new volunteers are from all 5 counties in the collaborative.

A collaboration among Georgia CASA and the CASA programs serving the metro Atlanta area has enhanced the programs' efficiency by combining functions and increased awareness of CASA programs through the presentation of a strong, unified message to the community.

Atlanta's metropolitan area includes Clayton, Cobb, DeKalb, Fulton and Gwinnett counties, all of which have CASA programs and independent courts. Four years ago, Georgia CASA, Inc. and the five CASA programs formed the Metro Atlanta Collaborative to increase awareness of the need for CASA volunteers in Atlanta's rapidly growing metropolitan community; to recruit, train and retain a CASA volunteer force large enough to meet the metropolitan area's growing needs; and to make availability of volunteers the rule—not the exception—in child abuse and neglect cases.

The collaborative programs' volunteer recruitment campaigns are managed by Georgia CASA. Programs play an active role in interviewing potential volunteers as well as conducting metro-wide orientations.

While each program holds pre-service trainings in its own county, a new metro-wide training is managed by Georgia CASA to handle overflow trainees. Program staff from the five counties share county-specific training information in break-out sessions.


Since joining forces in 2004, the collaborative has undertaken several successful projects:

- The collaborative has been awarded grants to increase public awareness of CASA programs through its volunteer recruitment campaigns. By working together, the programs have reached more potential CASA volunteers than could one program working independently. United with a website (metrocasa.org) and central phone line, the collaborative connects with people interested in the CASA mission regardless of where they reside in the greater Atlanta area.
- In 2006, the collaborative participated in the Art of Life project, which was hosted by National CASA in Atlanta. Part art gallery, part silent auction, the event showcased the artistic talents of local foster youth. For several years, the collaborative has also partnered with National CASA supporters Office Depot (to provide backpacks to school children) and Hewitt Associates (on a

holiday gift drive). Working together has made it easier for collaborative members to participate in activities and take advantage of national partnership opportunities.

- Last year, the collaborative partnered with the law firm of Sutherland, Asbill & Brennan, which has six offices nationwide. The firm promotes volunteer advocacy and encourages its employees to get involved in child advocacy work in the community. Today, its Atlanta office has four CASA volunteers among its employees while its Washington, DC office has two. Recently, each of the firm's offices held a "Jeans Day" to benefit collaborative CASA programs. Employees who donated \$5 could wear jeans to work on a designated Friday and were given a CASA sticker to wear, further increasing awareness of volunteer advocacy within the firm. Proceeds of more than \$4,800 benefited the local CASA programs of each of the firm's offices.

According to Duaine Hathaway, executive director of Georgia CASA, combining efforts among CASA programs in close proximity has been extremely successful in Atlanta. "Individual CASA programs receive so many benefits by working together on areas of program operations that are very similar, such as recruitment and training. It not only helps to present a unified CASA message to the metro Atlanta community, it increases the efficiency of the programs. In our case, program staff have more time to concentrate on day-to-day aspects of running a program, while the Georgia CASA project manager for the collaborative focuses on recruitment and metro-wide training."

For more information about the Metro-Atlanta Collaborative, contact Project Manager Diana Waters at (404) 874-2888 or dwaters@gacasa.org. 



ZZ Top DVD Release and Hard Rock Cafe Benefit

Child Advocates, Inc., Houston, TX

Houston's own Billy F. Gibbons, Dusty Hill and Frank Beard of ZZ Top, the legendary rock band, made a special appearance at the Hard Rock Cafe Houston in honor of the cafe's new memorabilia collection at an event benefiting Child Advocates, Inc. A member of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, ZZ Top is one of the most instantly recognizable rock bands; they have not made a personnel change in their nearly 40-year history.

"We're thrilled to be a part of this event," said Child Advocates, Inc. CEO Sonya Galvan. "We have two Houston institutions joining forces to support a third, and the abused and neglected children we serve will ultimately benefit; that's an ideal situation in my book."

Hockey Players Team Up to Become Defensemen for CASA

CASA of Ottawa County, Pathways, MI

The Skate Goats hockey team has partnered with CASA of Ottawa County, a program of Pathways, MI, to help children in foster care. The CASA program, with only one staff member, has successfully expanded its team over the past two years from 8 volunteers to 34—28 of whom are women—and is serving more than three times as many children as before. In the next year, the program hopes to increase the number of male volunteers.

Director Jody Molengraff feels that one of the most effective ways to accomplish this is through hockey. After she joined the Skate Goats earlier this year, team founders Jim McFarland and Darin Immink established a new "goal": to get the word out about the CASA program. So the Skate Goats have changed their name to Skate Goats for CASA and printed their jerseys with a new logo to match. Team members have committed to the fall volunteer training and are ready to be "Defensemen for CASA."

As team member McFarland said, "I was all for the idea because I know it is a good cause." Immink added:



Top row, left to right: Jody Molengraff, Ko Magee, Jim McFarland, Kevin Ewing, Bill Paarlberg, Keller Shaw. Bottom row: Travis Sabyan, Brent Barkel, Mike Reilly, Darin Immink

"It seems like something so easy—to wear the logo and get the name out, so we'll happily wear it."

Circus Benefits CASA

Sioux Falls Area CASA Program, SD

The Carson & Barnes Family Circus presented two shows recently, sponsored by the Diversity Kiwanis Club of Sioux Falls, to help raise funds for the Sioux Falls Area CASA Program



Tent raising

and other Kiwanis community projects. It was the club's first fundraiser with CASA and its biggest event so far.

"This was a wonderful family-focused event for CASA to be connected to. As an organization that promotes safe families, having a safe family activity was a win-win for everyone," states Amy Benda, CASA executive director, who nurtured the relationship between the two organizations. Her program helps about 400 children every year in Minnehaha and Lincoln counties.

The big top was raised at about 9 a.m. on "Circus Day," an event open to the public. As happens at each new stop, a tent the size of a football field was raised by the elephants, while 275 stakes were driven to anchor it. In the afternoon, circus-goers were allowed to pet and feed the animals.

Teens Tag for CASA

CASA of the Coastal Bend, Corpus Christi, TX

In an act that attracted much attention, CASA of the Coastal Bend turned a wall of graffiti into an advertisement rather than a symbol of vandalism. A little over two years ago, the CASA office building was tagged. Executive Director Page Hall, besides making a police report, wrote a letter to the vandals and said they were wasting their talents by tagging and not using their art to do something good. This year, the police department became involved in an effort to help students removed from school for behavior problems. The goal was to expose taggers to a positive way to use their talents and to help local businesses and organizations by creating advertising art.



The CASA program was the first organization chosen to benefit. The youth painted a huge mural with the CASA logo and telephone number on the side of the building, which sits right off the expressway. Much publicity—and controversy—was generated. But the best part, according to Hall, was that “this was probably the first time any of those kids ‘did their thing’ and then were asked by not just adults but by a police officer to sign their names and legitimize their art!”

Garden Tour

Malheur County CASA, Ontario, OR

As the weather warmed up and flowers bloomed, Malheur County CASA held its third garden tour, featuring seven gorgeous gardens in the Ontario area. Each showed different features



ranging from detailed landscaping to herb gardening to a rock display. Talking to the press, Pat Looney, board president, said, “We’re doing the garden tour to raise awareness of CASA...what it is, what it does and, of course, also to raise money. There are a lot of people that don’t know about it.” She went on to thank the hosts, visitors as well as the local businesses, individuals and organizations that gave financial support.

The Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption was honored by *Congressional Quarterly* and the Creative Coalition with the *Shining Star Award* at both the Democratic and Republican National Conventions on August 27 and September 3, respectively, for its significant work finding families for children in foster care. The foundation has helped connect tens of thousands of children with loving, permanent families since its creation by Dave Thomas in 1992. **Rita Soronen**, foundation executive



Rita Soronen with actor Tony Goodwin (left) and Editor-in-Chief Robert Merry of *Congressional Quarterly* at the award presentation

director and a former National CASA board member who continues to serve on the Education and Public Awareness Committee, said, “Our future rests with our children, and we are honored to be recognized for our tireless work on behalf of waiting children. Adoption is one of those issues that cross the partisan divide, and we look forward to working with the next administration to streamline the adoption process and secure loving, permanent families for every single waiting child in the US foster care system.”

The Broomfield Enterprise of Broomfield, CO carried an article on **Judge Chris Melonakis** recently as he moved chambers from Broomfield to Adams County Justice Center. A recent winner of National CASA's judge of the year award, Melonakis has been credited for

improving the court system for juveniles. Believing that setting youth on the correct road prevents them from becoming criminals as adults, he said, “The likelihood of changing [people’s]

behavior when they’re adults is significantly less than when they’re children. That’s where you make the meaningful change.” CASA of Adams and Broomfield Counties Program Director Simone Jones said of Melonakis, “He’s such a positive speaker about the impact CASA volunteers have on children and the justice system. People gravitate to the program because they respect him and what he has to say.” 🗨️



Dreams

A day, a hope, a time to be—
a wish, a love, I cannot see
So I try to live—no love, no pain
but now I see it's not sane
So I dream, I love, I hope, I see
the time would come when I can dream
Dream a love that's pure and true
and help me see what life can do
So I try—try to see
try to dream a life for me

—Peter L.



Peter L. and his CASA volunteer, Cheryl Sommese

"CASA means helping out those who need it and helping them to succeed," says Peter L., who is 18 years old and has been in placement since age 6. He has lived in several residential facilities in both New Hampshire and Massachusetts; his current placement is in a historic and quaint northern New Hampshire town. Peter's interests include writing poetry, drawing, sculpting, biking, cooking, fishing and hiking. This creative young man also enjoys spending time with animals. We learned of Peter through his CASA volunteer, Cheryl Sommese of CASA of New Hampshire. She has been a volunteer since 2000 and began working with Peter in 2002.

National CASA Conference: *Taking Advocacy to a Higher Level* April 25 - 28, 2009 • Sheraton Denver Hotel • Denver, CO

Join us in the Mile High City to make connections and gain knowledge that will take your advocacy for children to new heights!

2009 Conference News:

- Increased volunteer discount: Volunteers receive \$70 off of the regular conference registration price.
- Scholarships available to volunteers, staff and youth. Find additional information at casanet.org/conference.
- Workshops on topics including volunteer skills, fundraising and the new Fostering Connections to Success Act.

Conference registration and additional information will be available at casanet.org/conference in early December.

To receive notification of conference registration, discounts and other conference news, join our email distribution list by sending an email to staff@nationalcasa.org with the words "2009 National CASA Conference" in the subject line.



Give a gift that gives back, and remember National CASA in your holiday giving this season. You'll be supporting our nationwide recruitment and training of community volunteers who stand up for abused and neglected children.



National CASA is proud to partner again this holiday season with Fred Meyer/Littman Jewelers. This national jeweler is offering a limited-edition CASA Diamond Heart Pendant for \$119. The beautiful, heart-shaped pendant features diamond accents set in 10k white gold. From the sale of each pendant, \$10 will be donated to National CASA.

Visit shopcasa.org for a direct link to order online or to find a Fred Meyer/Littman Jewelers store near you.

"For All Those Special Times"

Fred Meyer JEWELERS

LITTMAN  JEWELERS

2 Ways to Give to Loved Ones While Benefiting Children



Organic Bouquet is National CASA's source for eco-friendly, sustainable and fairly traded products. A full 10% of proceeds from the sale of each seasonal selection (or any product purchased using the special link found on our website) will benefit National CASA.

Visit shopcasa.org to view this season's featured product—and be sure to use the special link directly from our site to ensure that 10% of your purchase goes to support our work.

**ORGANIC
BOUQUET** 
beautiful flowers, naturally



Rosalba Kiekow, a volunteer with Sarpy County CASA in Papillion, NE, grew up in Italy. She recently made her first visit in 17 years to see her family. While there, she visited the shrine to Padre Pio, aka Saint Pio (1887-1968) in Pietrelcina, a town in southern Italy. He was her role model as she was growing up, and his life had been dedicated to his "spiritual children."

A CASA volunteer for the past eight years, Kiekow has worked with three families and has earned the respect of her fellow volunteers as well as the professionals involved in the lives of the families served. According to Sarpy County CASA Director Georgie Scurfield, "Her warmth, commitment—and wonderful Italian cooking—are much appreciated!"



Where do you take *The Connection*? Send us a photo of you or someone you know reading *The Connection* in a unique or interesting location. Since the *Connection* staff is especially interested in comments from readers, submissions including feedback about the publication are most welcome. Whether you are on an airplane or in a courthouse waiting room, help spread the word about this amazing way to advocate for children by telling others about the CASA/GAL cause. Pass along your copy of *The Connection*.

Send photos (min. 4" x 6") to:
The Connection
 National CASA Association
 100 W. Harrison
 North Tower, Suite 500
 Seattle, WA, 98119
 or email high resolution photos (300 dpi scanned at 4" x 6" size) to theconnection@nationalcasa.org. Include your name, address, phone number, email address and photo location.



An Encouraging Word to Parents

Judge Glenda A. Hatchett
National CASA Spokesperson

So many mothers and fathers stop me to ask, “What can I do to become a better parent?” I think we all hunger for a constructive dialog—even when we

are not having “issues” as parents. So how do we reinforce the positive things that we are doing, and how do we learn new skills that make us even better parents? These are questions I have tried to address through my book and my television show—and that I hope to tackle in new ways in the future (see the note at the end of this article).

Of course as a dependency court judge I saw some of the direst cases of unsuccessful parenting. On days when the situation seemed especially grim, after being inundated with case after case involving horrendous abuse or neglect, I often felt it might be easier to just leave the children in foster care. So many times I could have simply brought down my gavel and said, “Next case!”

However with half a million children in care on any given day, a judge has to look at each case with a fresh, hopeful eye. I would often ask myself, “What small piece of the puzzle have I overlooked that would help bring these children home to a safe environment?” By doing this, I ended up seeing many examples of what parental determination can do. Changing one’s heart makes successful rehabilitation a distinct possibility, but it is often a tedious and very difficult road. It takes commitment—and the support of others—for a broken family to safely reunite. But it is so worth the effort.

I remember one woman, a drug addict, who appeared in my court. She literally said, “I’ll be back” one day and then disappeared for many months, abandoning her child. Then after a great deal of soul-searching, this mother finally understood that she needed to go into treatment. So she returned to my courtroom to begin the process. It was a long struggle, with numerous ups and downs, but she finally made a safe home and regained custody of her child.

We do not talk enough about what our CASA and GAL volunteers do for parents as well as for children. Advocates are there to support a child through the dependency

process. But in many cases, especially when younger children are involved, the volunteer must also form a relationship with the parents.

In another case I remember, the CASA volunteer reached out to a mother who was struggling and encouraged her to get back on her feet. It was clear that the mother needed to work on getting her GED in order to support herself. The volunteer asked probing questions of the mother and successfully encouraged her to see her own self-worth. I know that child eventually got to go home—and home to a much stronger situation than existed before—because of the CASA volunteer’s work with the mother.

But it is not just CASA volunteers who can help by encouraging parents. We can *all* find opportunities to give a hopeful word to a parent who is struggling. All of us involved in the dependency system should be particularly mindful of how we can be supportive. It might mean telling a young mother who has been out of the job market that she can go to a Dress for Success program to get the appropriate attire for an interview. It might mean referring a father to a literacy program so he can get a better job as well as read to his children and understand their homework. I think in some cases it simply means saying “I’m pulling for you” at a critical moment.

Ultimately we want children in foster care to be able to go back home. And the stronger the parents are, the more likely this is to happen. By law, courts and child protection agencies are required to create reunification plans. We have plenty of programs dedicated to this goal. But it is no secret that we do not have enough resources, including caseworkers, to move families through in a timely way. That is why CASA volunteers are so critically important as an added dimension in a child’s life. Bringing new eyes, new ears, new hearts to this process can only help the children we serve. 📢

The Honorable Glenda A. Hatchett is a nationally recognized authority on juvenile issues known for her award-winning television series Judge Hatchett and her book Say What You Mean, Mean What You Say! Judge Hatchett is also holding free “Parent Power” conferences around the country. See her website for more information: glendahatchett.com.



Save for the Holidays

with
ShopCASA's
Annual Half-Price Sale

ShopCASA.org

November 1 through December 31.

Gold or Silver CASA Acronym Pin

Raise awareness of the CASA cause by wearing and sharing the stylish CASA lapel pin. A great conversation starter, these pins are goldtone or silvertone with the CASA acronym in black enamel. Each pin measures approximately $\frac{5}{8}$ " x $\frac{3}{4}$ ".

SALE PRICE \$1.50



LED Light Key Ring

This translucent red, push button, LED key ring features a really bright, perfect spot of light right where you need it. $2\frac{3}{4}$ " long including split key ring with CASA logo imprint in white.

SALE PRICE \$2.50

Speak Up Lapel Pin

This cloisonné pin is a customized version of the "Speak Up for a Child" slogan in gold on black enamel. A striking accessory for any child advocate. Approximate size is $\frac{5}{8}$ " x $\frac{3}{4}$ ".

SALE PRICE \$1.50



License Plate Frame

Get the CASA message on the road with this slim license plate frame. It displays your whole license plate and will enhance any vehicle's appearance. Made of durable plastic, the frame is white with the CASA logo and text in black. Put one on your car today!

**SALE PRICE
\$2.50**



Stretch
your
holiday
dollar!

Premium CASA Ink Pen

This pen has blue ink, an easy-to-hold dark blue triangular barrel with silver accents and the CASA logo engraved on the side.

Beautifully styled, this click-action ball pen has a soft-touch rubberized grip to enhance writing comfort.

SALE PRICE \$2.99



To order or see more items, visit ShopCASA.org. While supplies last.



National Court Appointed
Special Advocate Association
100 West Harrison Street
North Tower, Suite 500
Seattle, WA 98119-4123

Non-Profit Org.
U.S. Postage
PAID
Lancaster, PA
Permit No. 308