

# THE Connection

News and Information from the National Court Appointed Special Advocate Association



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# volunteer voice

## Jane Berger

CASA Volunteer  
Okmulgee County/Muscogee (Creek) Nation CASA  
Okmulgee, OK

I am a proud member of the Muscogee tribe in Oklahoma. In the name of our CASA program, shown above, you can see that the word *Creek* is in parentheses. That is the name the US government calls us. But we call ourselves *Muscogee*.

In 2004, I began serving on my CASA program's advisory board. I have been a volunteer advocate for two years. Now on my second case, I have worked with three children. I came to the program as a retired Head Start teacher.

During the years that I worked with Head Start, we never knew what happened to children who were removed by the court system due to child abuse. They just disappeared from the classroom. We had no input except to occasionally testify in court. I had a strong desire to have some continued influence with the children after they went into foster care. Being a CASA volunteer has fulfilled that wish. Volunteering for the CASA program also comes with a great deal of training, guidance and support. It is truly a well organized volunteer organization where you can see the results of your efforts.

I have sustained my commitment to the CASA program these past four years because I have been able to work with children and families from my Indian tribe. It is our tradition for the elders to be involved in rearing children and to show concern for all the children in the tribe, not just those from our own families. The greater community and my extended family helped raise me. My own six children have also benefited from this tradition.

The clothing I wear in my photo is significant because it is the traditional clothing of the women of my tribe since before the Trail of Tears. It is similar to clothing worn by 18th-century colonial women. The ribbon-striped apron and ribbons on the dress are Native American additions. Other tribes of the Southeast wear similar clothes.

I believe it is important to match American Indian/Alaska Native children with CASA volunteers from their own culture. We understand what it is going to mean to these children as they get older that they are American Indians—or, in our case, Muscogee citizens. We understand the challenges of dealing with the majority culture. This is also a way we can help pass our traditions to our tribe's children.

Of course many non-Native CASA volunteers also work with Indian children. My advice to cross-cultural volunteers: Take it slowly. Be quick to listen and slow to judge. When you are working with the adult family members, it is especially important to take your time. It is also helpful to know something about the particular Indian tribe because each one has its own culture. I recommend that you set aside your preconceptions and really focus on whether the child is getting what he or she needs.

It may sound daunting to have to learn about a new culture. But most of the larger tribes have cultural preservation offices. I would just walk in and say that I am

a CASA volunteer and I need to know more about the tribe in order to help a child. You can often find information about the tribe in your local public library as well.

In the case I served that was recently resolved, I believe I made a difference because of my close contact with the mother. She turned around and has done well with her life. She is sober, and she has a job. And now she has her children back. It has made a real difference for these young children to no longer be bounced around in foster or kinship care.

In the early part of the case, these preschoolers had gotten into the habit of calling their grandmother "Mama" while they were staying with her. Then when we were trying to reintroduce them to their mother, they were calling her by her first name. I encouraged the family on both sides to have the children call her "Mommy" instead. We all worked on that, and it did help. I could see the difference in the mother's face when she was called "Mommy." I think it motivated her to really get her act together and become a parent to her children.

One of the gifts of being a volunteer advocate has been seeing how my tribal court works with the CASA program. The child welfare workers make great partners. That has been very encouraging to me because I am almost 61 years old, and there was a time when American Indians did not have this. I celebrate that my tribe has its own child welfare system and its own court. And they are working! 📣



# A New Day for Older Youth Leaving Care

Hon. Ernestine Gray  
Orleans Parish Juvenile Court,  
New Orleans, LA and  
President, National CASA



*"While I was in care, I was so focused on wanting to be out that I wasn't thinking about what I wanted to do when I got out."*

—Teenager from Anchorage, AK

*"(The big problem is) cutting off the aid. Because basically you've been sheltered all your life. Once you're free, people want to go out and roam and do stuff. And then once you've got your head together, you've basically messed up your benefits."*

—Teenager from Dallas, TX

As announced in our last issue, historic foster care and adoption legislation was enacted last fall. National CASA and the entire CASA/GAL network were very active in helping Congress to shape this landmark reform, the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act. A key element of the legislation is new support for youth from ages 18 to 21.

Part of what informed National CASA's efforts in this regard was a series of discussion groups we hosted last year for youth in foster care. Fifty teens in five US cities participated, providing their personal insights in a number of areas relating to their experiences in foster care. You can find the full results at [CASAnet.org](http://CASAnet.org) (see "2008 Foster Youth Focus Groups" under Featured News and Items of Interest on the home page). These young people shared their thoughts and feelings about the effect of the child welfare system on their motivation, how they manage their schooling, the impact of an adult presence in their lives and other topics. But what struck me most were the findings that touched on aging out of foster care, illustrated by the quotes above. Some of the conclusions from this research indicate that:

- A major problem that needs to be addressed is the transition period from foster care to adult independence.
- These youth have grown up in a world with constantly changing authority figures and rules.
- Many youth want to leave the system so badly that they burst out and often find themselves unprepared, having missed out on resources that were available to them.

I have seen these same issues played out time after time in my own courtroom. Older youth are chomping at the bit for freedom. They do not want social workers or anybody else telling them what to do once they turn 18. But here in New Orleans, as in many jurisdictions, youth can choose to receive assistance with housing and health care up to age 21 as long as they are in school or working. It requires a continuing relationship with the child welfare system—but with a great deal more autonomy. The problem is that many youth are so self-confident (or so embittered) that they do not take advantage of what is available to them.

Part of our responsibility as child advocates is teaching youth ways to make the system work for them. It can be difficult getting them to see that while there are indeed some restrictions that come with continued involvement with the agency, they will be able to make tremendous decisions on their own. But they will also have some help, some security.

For me that is the crux of our work as CASA volunteers, social workers, foster parents and judges. How do we engage young people in a way that honors the fact that their experience in foster care has not been all positive? How do we have a meaningful dialog about the benefits of taking advantage of help that is available?

Youth engage with different people in different ways at different times. What I have found in dealing with young people is that often they cannot positively receive a messenger. While they might not be able to "hear" their

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# 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.

The nationwide Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) movement mobilizes community volunteers to 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.

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# My Journey with Indian Child Welfare and Volunteer Advocacy

Nadja Jones

Senior Community Development Specialist, National Indian Child Welfare Association and Member, National CASA Inclusiveness and Outreach Committee and Standards Committee



**M**y work in the field of child welfare began in 1992, when I interned with Native American Community Services of Buffalo, NY. This experience led me to realize that my role in the community would be a continuation of the culture I was raised in, which is the matriarchal society of the Onondaga Nation. I am an enrolled member of the Comanche tribe.

In 1978, my family became one of the first on my reservation to take in foster children after the implementation of the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA). My mom would bring home children 3 months to 17 years old when I was growing up in Onondaga. And I realized early on that these children really did not have anyone for them. I knew they were on their own.

My role at the National Indian Child Welfare Association (NICWA) is technical assistance provider. I train people on topics specific to improving child welfare and translate the values of tribal families to organizations with resources that families need. About six years ago, I was happy to join National CASA's Tribal Children's Advisory Committee. In the last year, this committee has merged with several others to become the Inclusiveness and Outreach Committee.

What led me to work with CASA programs is my knowledge of how often the level of testimony provided in dependency court is limited to certain individuals: the child welfare worker, the attorney, the court appointed special advocate or an expert witness. Tribal families are not always supported through the depen-

dency court process, and their children's only voice is often a CASA volunteer.

Early this decade, the Tribal Law and Policy Institute, NICWA and other tribal programs voiced concerns that CASA volunteers were not uniformly knowledgeable about how tribal communities operate and how their members support each other. These concerns led to a desire that all CASA volunteers—most of whom are non-Indians—fully understand what tribal families need from them.

A year or two after joining the Tribal Children's Advisory Committee, I was invited onto the Standards Committee as well. This group drafts the standards required of all National CASA member programs. A Standards Committee meeting in 2005 shifted how well CASA programs really adhere to the principles and mandates of ICWA. Our organization sometimes refers to "champions for ICWA" who are not Native, and I met some of these champions in that room. CASA representatives Judge Ernestine Gray, Trudy Strewler and retired Judge J. Dean Lewis were all actively seeking positive improvements for tribal children in dependency court. The eventual requirement of all CASA programs to include ICWA compliance information and resources in their training of all volunteers is one of my professional career highlights.

The real press for including ICWA in CASA training is that a certain level of effort is required of any volunteer working with an Indian child. When CASA volunteers report to court, they are

trying to convey to the judge what their recommendations are based on their knowledge and experience. And we must require that volunteers include in their knowledge an understanding of ICWA, of the difference between "reasonable" and "active" efforts and of the historical context from which these children come into the system. It took several years of working together to build the NICWA-CASA relationship and to make this training a priority. The work involved finding opportunities for individuals from both organizations to get to know each other, listening for mutual values and developing a mutual understanding of tribal sovereignty.

CASA volunteers are so needed. Let's make them the best advocates possible. Let's find volunteers who understand the effects of poverty and know that just because you are poor does not mean you are not a good parent. Let's train volunteers to see that just because parents may face addiction issues does not necessarily mean they are abusing their kids. Let's help volunteers understand the challenges of being raised on a continent that used to be populated by *all* indigenous people. That historical context is often lost in court proceedings. It is contingent upon us at NICWA to improve that dialogue and to provide resources for CASA volunteers.

Our children will often stand alone in court unless there is a CASA volunteer next to them. So let's continue to work together to make volunteer advocates the best they can be. 📣



*How do we engage young people in a way that honors the fact that their experience in foster care has not been all positive?*

social worker at a point in time, they may be engaged by their CASA volunteer or judge. I think we need to get youth information about resources in

as many different ways and from as many different sources as possible.

My advice for adults working with older youth in care: Look at them as you would any teen. Recognize that they are going through a developmental process. As they are breaking away from parental ties, they may from time to time be rebellious. Just know that even as teens are pushing you away, they still need you to be involved. They still need a CASA volunteer to advocate for them, to support them. I really believe that whether or not many of these young people make it depends on the total engagement of a CASA volunteer or other concerned adult, engagement which really values the child as an individual.

Many youth have opportunities siphoned away because they have the label of being in foster care. We have to change the dynamic of low expectations for these kids. They deserve the same high expectations that we have for our own children. They need to hear from us that we will hold them to their role and responsibility, that we expect them to do their best—and that we know their best is as good as anybody else's.

Keeping these things in mind, we can help youth define themselves in important ways. Rather than being pegged by what has happened to them, by the fact that they have had a stint in foster care, they will be truly free to write their own story for the future. 🗨️



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.

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# Disconnection from and Reconnection to My Culture

Angel D. Adams, 20

Staying connected to *anything* is difficult when you're a child or youth in foster care. Being an Alaska Native who had been in and out of the foster care system from as far back as I can remember, it was especially hard to stay connected to my culture—or even be proud of it. Due to experiences that I endured growing up, I was, to be honest, ashamed of my Alaska Native culture. After all, the only Natives I knew were alcoholics and abusers. And of course stereotypes I learned from others reinforced these ideas. For years I didn't want anything to do with my Yu'pik culture. Anytime someone asked me if I were Native, I would reply with shame, "Yes," and then elaborate on the fact that I am also Hispanic. Eventually, I would claim only my Hispanic culture; I learned everything I possibly could about *that* part of me, all the while shunning my Alaska Native culture.

I kept on with that nonsense until my baby brother and I moved into our adoptive family's house when I was 13. My mama and daddy began to open my eyes and show me that God made me the way I am for a reason and that I should be proud of who I am no matter what *other* people say, how *other* people act or what *other* people do. It was hard because I had never been taught that I should be proud of who I am or proud of my culture. It seemed like nobody else in my family was proud to be Native, so why would I be? My mama continuously opened doors and presented opportunities for me to stay connected to my culture, even though I kept rejecting them. My

older brother also showed me how silly I looked and sounded rejecting who I am.

My mama helped me to tap back into things I had forgotten that I liked to do, which had plenty to do with my Alaska Native culture. My biological grandmother had taught me how to sew when I was little; I design and make some of my own clothes now. I also learned how to bead when I was little; I love accessories, and I still enjoy making jewelry out of colorful beads.

There is a little song in Yu'pik that is sung to babies when playing with them. I don't really know how to spell the words, but I'll sound them out as best I can: "*Soo-gie, Soo-gie! Ama-ga-jook, Athe-ga-jook, Gook!*" I wouldn't sing it for quite a few years, but now I often sing it to the babies in my house. It's adorable because when I play and sing it with them, they are so tickled by it that I can't help but laugh.

To say that I have fully overcome the obstacles to embracing my heritage would be deceitful. I still have my moments when I am indifferent to activities that have to do with my Native culture. However, I have improved greatly, and I hold my head high when I say that I am Yu'pik Alaska Native. I hold my head high when I proclaim that I am a Native who does not drink or do drugs, who graduated from high school and who is in college working towards a degree in art with a minor in psychology. I am proud to say that I define who I am and not my predecessors. I am proud.



If only there were more people like my adoptive family who know the importance of children and youth staying connected to their culture—and who actually support them in doing so. My mama constantly keeps her eyes and ears open for opportunities for my brother and me to participate in cultural events. Some examples of how she has kept us connected are taking us to the Alaska Native Heritage Center, signing us up for culture-based classes in school and giving us related activities to do such as beading and drum playing. My mama and daddy have also encouraged me to read up on my Yu'pik culture and even take classes to learn my native tongue. If there were more people who would support children and youth staying connected to their culture, there wouldn't be so many cultural gaps in our society. And there wouldn't be as many personal gaps within individual youth. 🗣️

*Angel D. Adams of Anchorage, AK, is a member of Facing Foster Care in Alaska and a student at the University of Alaska Anchorage. She also created the artwork for this issue's cover, of which she states, "This drawing shows different aspects of the Yu'pik culture. The needle and thread entwined through and around the other elements bind them all together, keeping the connection between the Yu'pik youth and his culture." Angel also created the cover for the Fall 2008 issue of The Connection.*

# Serving Native American Children in Foster Care

Lisette Austin

American Indian and Alaska Native\* children face a number of significant challenges. Many are born into communities that experience widespread poverty, substance abuse, domestic violence and chronic health problems at much higher rates than non-Native communities. US government policies that for years sought to eradicate American Indian culture, sovereignty and way of life contributed greatly to these tragic circumstances. While many tribes survived this onslaught, most are still navigating the psychological and physical aftermath of practices many consider to have been cultural genocide.

According to national statistics, the general well-being of American Indian children trails significantly behind children from other ethnic groups. Recent research shows that while the US child mortality rate for children ages 1–14 has gone down by 9% since 2000, it has increased by 15% among Indian children. National data shows that Indian youth face higher rates of poverty, teenage suicide (nearly 2–2.5 times greater than Caucasian teens) and substance abuse. According to the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System, American Indian/Alaska Native children experience a rate of child abuse and neglect of 16.5 per 1,000 as compared to 10.8 for Caucasian children. They are overrepresented in the population of child maltreatment victims at more than 1.6 times the expected level. In addition, studies show that Native children receive fewer supportive services to promote stability, safety and general well-being.

Serious disparities also exist in relation to the US child welfare system. Children and families of color, particularly American Indian/Alaska Native and African-American children, are entering foster care at rates higher than non-minority children—and they stay in care longer. According to a 2007 report by the National Indian Child Welfare Association (NICWA), American Indian children are represented at nearly two times the level expected. Although Native children make up roughly 1% of the national child population, they are 2% of the children who



Photo courtesy of Alaska CASA

entered foster care in 2005 and 2% of children in foster care waiting to be adopted. This disproportionality in the child welfare system happens at every step along the way, from the initial call to Child Protective Services (CPS) to placement and court proceedings.

## The Indian Child Welfare Act

This current reality echoes a much darker period for Native children. From the early 1800s until the 1970s, there was a deliberate effort by the US government to “civilize” and assimilate American Indians into mainstream American culture. Many Indian children were torn from their families and tribal communities, placed in boarding schools and forbidden to speak their native language.

By the 1970s, approximately 25–35% of all Native children were being placed in institutions, foster homes or adoptive homes—three times the rate of non-Indian children. Many suffered terrible abuse both in boarding schools and foster homes. These placements were rooted in a system that did not respect or recognize American Indian cultures and instead sought to strip children of their traditional ways of life. Congress finally responded to these unjust practices by passing the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) in 1978.

ICWA requires that every state court dependency case involving an American Indian/Alaska Native child adhere to

\*American Indian/Alaska Native is the terminology currently preferred by most tribal people and therefore by National CASA. However for the sake of variety and brevity, this term is alternated with *Native American*, *Native* and *Indian* throughout this issue.



specific requirements. The act generally requires that Native children, once removed, be placed whenever possible in homes that reflect their unique cultures and values—and that tribes be involved in placement decisions. These requirements are intended to protect the integrity and future of tribal communities by protecting their children's cultural identity and tribal citizenship.

And there is good reason to do so. "We know from research that American Indian children in the child welfare system who are connected to Native culture thrive and do much better than those who aren't," says Dr. Antony Stately, a clinical psychologist at the University of Washington who is Ojibwe/Oneida. Stately's career has focused primarily on child maltreatment and neglect, and he currently sits on King County's Local Indian Child Welfare Advisory Committee.

"We also know that Indian kids in foster care settings where they are disconnected from siblings, family and their culture are at much greater risk for behavioral and mental health problems," Stately explains. "And unfortunately Native kids in foster care are less likely to receive therapeutic services and are more likely to be misdiagnosed and overmedicated as compared to Caucasian children," he says.

As important and well intentioned as the Indian Child Welfare Act is, it is not always followed. Thirty years after the act's inception, the removal of American Indian children from their homes still happens at an alarming rate. Many end up disconnected from their tribal culture and extended family. ICWA is an unfunded mandate, and responsibility for its enactment often falls on the shoulders of the tribes—most of whom still struggle with severe poverty and lack of resources.

"ICWA is usually followed only if people make enough noise or have enough resources," says Stately. "The reality is that many judges, caseworkers and advocates are still largely unaware of the importance and specific requirements of ICWA," he says.

Organizations such as the National Indian Child Welfare Association are working tirelessly to help ensure that ICWA is followed in all placement cases involving American Indian/Alaska Native children. Other organizations involved in foster care issues, such as the National CASA Association and the Annie E. Casey Foundation, are also taking significant steps to raise awareness about how best to advocate for American Indian children in the child welfare system and follow the important mandate of ICWA.

### CASA Tribal Programs

Tribes are sovereign nations and therefore have the power to make their own laws and have their own court system. There are over 500 federally recognized Native American tribes and Alaska Native villages—and more

### Tips for Advocates

1. Understand the purpose of ICWA. Learn as much about it as you can by studying the *Volunteer Manual* from National CASA's *Volunteer Training Curriculum*, taking advantage of other training and visiting the websites listed under "Resources." Help to make sure that this law is the guiding force in any dependency action involving an American Indian/Alaska Native child.
2. Find out as soon as you can whether the child you are working with has Native heritage. If so, bring this to the attention of child protective services and the court. Also review provisions of ICWA to determine whether it is being upheld in the case.
3. Do not assume that all lawyers, caseworkers and other child welfare service providers are aware of ICWA requirements. Educate those working on the child's case as much as possible.
4. Find out whether the child is enrolled in her tribe. If not, find out what steps you need to take toward enrollment and tribal benefits.
5. Contact the child's tribe and determine what resources are available to him (e.g., relative or tribal placement options, treatment programs for parents, housing options and educational placements).
6. Make every effort to learn about the child's tribe. Most tribes willingly share information about their history and community (government, cultural events and activities). Create a fact sheet about the tribe for yourself.
7. Seek out activities that connect the child with his or her tribe and culture. Encourage contact between possible tribal placements and the Native child even while parents are working toward reunification.
8. Remember that every tribe is unique. Some have significant resources; some have very few. Avoid making broad assumptions.
9. Be willing to learn about and accept cultural values and perspectives that are not your own. Take time to build trust with the tribal community. Be respectful, a good listener and open-minded.
10. Acknowledge the reality of disproportionality and institutional racism in the child welfare system. Realize that you may need to advocate even harder for a Native American child. Ask important questions early. Has he had an evaluation? Are there culturally competent services available to the child?
11. Examine your perceptions and expectations about Native people. Understand the context in which many Indian children and families find themselves, most notably poverty. Try to place yourself in their shoes.
12. Recognize when you are in over your head or in uncharted territory. Ask for advice and support. Be humble and acknowledge that you do not know everything.

—Compiled by the author from interview sources

than 250 have tribal court systems in place. National CASA recognizes the need for advocacy in tribal courts, particularly advocacy provided by tribal community members. In 1995, National CASA began receiving funding from the federal Office for Victims of Crime to extend the CASA program into tribal courts.

National CASA currently has 15 member tribal court CASA programs. All are west of the Mississippi and were initiated through requests from tribal communities. Some of the programs serve only specific tribes while others are dual jurisdiction, operating in both tribal and state courts. All of the tribal programs provide American Indian children with advocates who understand the importance of ICWA and take into account the child's unique cultural background and tribal citizenship.

There is an amazing amount of diversity among tribes, including differences in resources, government structure, geography and culture. Many tribes experience significant challenges in investigating and prosecuting cases of child maltreatment, while others are more successful. This means there cannot be a cookie-cutter approach when developing tribal court CASA programs.

"One must be very careful if making any assumptions about a tribal community," says Michael Heaton, a regional program specialist for National CASA. Heaton serves as liaison between local programs and National CASA; his region encompasses nine western states and includes several tribal programs.

"Tribes may seem similar but are often very different from each other, even if close neighbors," says Heaton. He finds it important to recognize and honor each tribe's unique culture and needs. "Much of my work with tribal CASA programs is learning about each tribe's social, economic and cultural issues, then talking and working with tribal members to best serve their children."

For Angela Fasana, tribal member and CASA director for the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde in Oregon, the way to best serve their children is clear. "We are lucky here. We have an indigent defense fund, which means each child who comes into court gets representation," says Fasana. "But what we were missing was a connection to the tribe."

Fasana is also the tribal court administrator for the tribes, and she saw too often that when the tribal court stepped in, children who sometimes were not very involved with their community to begin with were left with a feeling of animosity toward the tribe. "We wanted to change that—and help them see that there is more to this tribe than the tribal child welfare system," she explains.

When Fasana was contacted a year ago by a local CASA program director who wanted advice on how to recruit more Native advocates, she saw a great opportunity. She presented information about volunteer advocacy to the tribe, which in turn decided to start its own CASA tribal court program. They contacted National CASA, and soon Fasana had recruited two volunteers from the tribal community.

Fasana's advocates not only participate in the regular CASA training process, they also undergo cultural training specific to the Grand Ronde tribes. This additional training stresses the importance of involving children in cultural activities so that they can come to know their tribal community, a major resource and support for them. "Exposing children to the tribe and to their culture is the driving force for this program. This is my big dream," says Fasana.



Creek Nation tribe member and CASA volunteer Sarah Sebring with her nephew. In March, 15 state agencies will honor the tribal court CASA collaboration between the Okmulgee County Family Resource Center and the Muscogee (Creek) Nation Tribe with a *Partners Award* at the 2009 Partnership Conference for Oklahoma Families. See page 19.

Kym Miller is equally dedicated to the tribal children she serves. In 2008, Miller was hired as program coordinator for the Kenaitze Indian Tribal CASA Program in Kenai, Alaska. It is the only tribal court CASA program in the state and is funded by National CASA. When she came on board, the program had been in existence for three years but had only one advocate. Miller, who had recently moved to this remote community 150 miles from Anchorage, hit the streets and started getting to know people in the community in a very proactive way. "I met with elders, volunteered at the elementary school and other programs—did anything to meet and connect with the community."

Miller is Athabascan Alaska Native from Anvik, a very small community. She knew that if she wanted to engage the community in the CASA program, she first had to invest herself in the community and build trust. "That's how Native culture is. It takes time to really develop a rapport

[Continued on page 10]

# Resources for Advocating for Native Children in Foster Care

*The following websites, publications and organizations are helpful in understanding issues and strategies surrounding advocacy for American Indian/Alaska Native children in foster care.*

## **American Indian Tribes and Cultures ([42explore2.com/native4.htm](http://42explore2.com/native4.htm))**

This website provides links to other sites with information about specific American Indian tribes and cultures, including comprehensive index sites, sites about Native cultures and history as well as individual tribal websites.

## **Indian Country Child Trauma Center ([icctc.org](http://icctc.org))**

The Indian Country Child Trauma Center develops trauma-related treatment protocols, outreach materials and service delivery guidelines specifically for Native children and families.

## **National Indian Child Welfare Association (nicwa.org)**

The National Indian Child Welfare Association is the most comprehensive source of information on Indian child welfare. NICWA works to address child abuse and neglect through training, research, public policy and grassroots community development. Their site also provides links to information on Native culture.

## **National American Indian Court Judges Association ([naicja.org](http://naicja.org))**

The National American Indian Court Judges Association is a national voluntary association of tribal court judges primarily devoted to the support of American Indian and Alaska Native justice systems through education, information sharing and advocacy.

## **Native American Rights Fund (narf.org)**

The Native American Rights Fund is a nonprofit organization that provides legal representation and technical assistance to Indian tribes, organizations and individuals nationwide. NARF focuses on applying existing laws and treaties to guarantee that national and state governments live up to their legal obligations.

## **Native Youth Magazine ([nativeyouthmagazine.com](http://nativeyouthmagazine.com))**

This online magazine focuses on the talents and lifestyles of Native youth in the US and Canada. It features commentaries, profiles, photos and artwork submitted by Native youth. *Native Youth Magazine* provides an opportunity for American Indian/Alaska Native youth to tell their stories and also explore the world of journalism.



## **"Soul Wound: The Legacy of Native American Schools"**

This article published by Amnesty International USA gives an overview of the devastation caused by almost 100 years of policies that forced Native children to attend Christian boarding schools. The article can be viewed at [amnestysusa.org/amnestynow/soulwound.html](http://amnestysusa.org/amnestynow/soulwound.html).

## **"ICWA and CASA/GAL Volunteers: Advocating for the Best Interests of Native Children"**

This 2001 article was written by Judge Abby Abinanti and published by National CASA in *The Connection* magazine. The article gives an overview of ICWA and discusses the importance of CASA advocacy for American Indian/Alaska Native children in foster care. It is available in PDF format at [casanet.org/program-services/tribal](http://casanet.org/program-services/tribal). From there, click on the article title under "Indian Child Welfare Act."

## **The Judges' Page Newsletter ([nationalcasa.org/JudgesPage](http://nationalcasa.org/JudgesPage))**

This online newsletter, published by National CASA and the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, is also a resource for CASA volunteers. The April 2004 issue, *The Indian Child Welfare Act*, outlines the history of ICWA, discusses judicial ethics and implementation of ICWA and includes an article about CASA advocacy in tribal courts.

## **Tribal Court CASA ([casanet.org/program-services/tribal](http://casanet.org/program-services/tribal))**

This section of National CASA's resource website provides information about tribal court CASA programs. The section includes tips for starting and developing these programs, information about ICWA and links to related organizations.

## **Tribal Court Clearinghouse (tribal-institute.org)**

This clearinghouse was developed by the Tribal Law and Policy Institute, an Indian-operated nonprofit that develops education, research, training and technical assistance programs to enhance justice in Indian country as well as the health, well-being and culture of Native peoples. The clearinghouse provides extensive resources about tribal, federal and state laws that affect Native peoples, including the full text of ICWA.



## Understanding the Justice of ICWA

Hon. Abby Abinanti

Many people, when initially faced with issues involving American Indian children, grapple with the concept of different treatment for Indian children. Some may feel it is not fair to the child to be treated differently, to have different rules than non-Indian children. It is the CASA volunteer's job to understand and ensure that the Indian child's special rights are acknowledged and secured.

To be able to advocate in such a manner it is essential that the CASA volunteer understand the basis for this difference. It can best be understood as a citizenship right. Congress in passing ICWA essentially acknowledged the premise that an Indian child's citizenship within the tribe is a valuable right to be protected for the child. Many tangible and intangible benefits flow from citizenship. The sovereign tribe has an interest in the welfare of each of its citizens.

An Indian child's rights as articulated in ICWA are not based simply on race or cultural considerations; they are based on the political relationship that exists between the United States and each of the recognized tribes. According to the law, these tribes are considered domestic, dependent nations and as such have a special relationship with the federal government that transcends the relationship of states to other citizens.

Each Indian child has an interest in his or her tribe, and each tribe has an interest in each of its children. ICWA is designed to prevent inappropriate interference with this relationship.

*Excerpted from "The Indian Child Welfare Act and CASA: Advocating for the Best Interests of Native Children," by Hon. Abby Abinanti, commissioner of the Superior Court of California and former member of the National CASA Board of Trustees, The Connection, Fall 2001.*

[Cover Story continued from page 8]

with a tribe," Miller says. "You have to show that you are a friend to the reservation community, that you are really interested in the 'best good.' If you do this, you will see the benefit."

And indeed she did. Within seven months, Miller had recruited ten new advocates into the Kenaitze Indian Tribal CASA Program. Roughly 75% of the advocates are Alaska Native and tribal members. The ones who are non-Native have strong ties to, and are respected by, the community. All of the advocates have received additional cultural training provided by the tribe's cultural education program.

Miller is now helping start other CASA programs in the state in places like Nome and Bethel. She feels that there is a very strong need for more programs. "We have horrible

statistics up here in Alaska. We're the highest in suicide among Natives, including youth," she says. She is grateful, however, to be in a state that strongly supports the Indian Child Welfare Act. "Up here in Alaska many people working with tribes are very aware of the importance of this act. We are lucky," Miller says.

## Non-Tribal Court CASA Programs Serving Native Children

There are many state court CASA programs that serve American Indian/Alaska Native children as well. Chad Catron, director of Rapid City, South Dakota's Seventh Circuit CASA Program, says that approximately 60% of their cases involve American Indian children, predominantly from the Lakota Sioux tribes. Out of the program's nearly 100 volunteers, only a few are Native. Because of this, Catron makes sure that his advocates receive additional training.

"We bring in someone to do a half-day training on ICWA as part of the initial advocate training, and we also try to revisit it at least once a year," Catron says. "There are also lots of trainings available in the area related to ICWA, so when those happen we try to get as many of our staff to attend as possible. We recognize the importance of ICWA in preserving Native culture."

Trainings also focus on cultural sensitivity. "Typically we have someone come from the ICWA office who is Lakota Sioux, and she talks about cultural awareness," explains Catron. CASA volunteers are also encouraged to attend the many Lakota events that are available in the area and to connect with the tribes as much as possible. "Learning more about the Lakota culture goes a long way toward building trust with the Native children and families we serve," he says. "The biggest thing that our advocates can do is learn about and understand the culture."

Diane Wilson, a CASA volunteer in the Rapid City program, agrees. "Often CASA advocates are unaware of cultural differences; for example how many Native cultures think direct eye contact is inappropriate," says Wilson. "You'll end up with advocates thinking a family is hiding something because they won't look them in the eye."

Wilson also emphasizes the importance of recognizing differences in child-rearing practices, ways of speaking and the reality that not all tribes are the same. "As an advocate, you need to be very aware of these kinds of cultural differences and be very respectful toward the tribal community you are working with," she says.

There are, of course, many challenges for non-tribal court CASA programs that serve high numbers of Native children. A major one is recruitment of Indian volunteers. "That is something that has always plagued us, getting numbers of Native American volunteers up," says Catron.

This does not surprise Angela Fasana, director of the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde CASA Program. “Non-tribal CASA programs will face a lot of difficulty with recruitment of Native advocates due to historical trauma and resulting mistrust,” she says. “That’s not going to change easily. But programs can take steps to get to know local tribal cultures. Building trust and understanding is key.”

### Keeping an Open Mind

The reality is that many advocates who find themselves serving American Indian/Alaska Native children and families will be non-Native. This does not mean they cannot effectively advocate for Indian children. It does mean, however, that they need to be willing to educate themselves about the child’s tribe and extended family, to examine their pre-conceived ideas about Native people and to ask for guidance as much as possible.

All children on an advocate’s caseload face tremendous difficulties. Volunteers may wonder why such a special focus should be placed on American Indian children. Psychologist Antony Stately of Washington has a response to this.

“You have to recognize that when an American Indian child comes into the child welfare system, they are more likely to have less advocacy, less protections and receive fewer services,” says Stately. “We know that these children are at higher risk. You have to recognize disproportionality and the reality of institutional racism.”

A related factor is that decades of removal of American Indian children from their homes nearly eradicated tribal cultures and profoundly traumatized Native communities. Because of this, every Indian child welfare case needs to be approached with increased awareness and sensitivity.

Stately feels it is important that advocates keep in mind the tough realities that many Native parents face and try to have realistic expectations. “It is so important to place everything in context,” he says. “How are you going to parent effectively when you and your community regularly experience intergenerational trauma, racism, poverty, incarceration and abuse?” he asks.

Research cited by Stately shows that American Indian parents are much more likely to be pegged as abusers than non-Native parents, primarily because they do not have resources to fight accusations. “We expect so much from parents, even in much easier circumstances,” he says.

Chad Catron asks his advocates in Rapid City to think about the realities that their families face. “Many of our families don’t have transportation, so sometimes the timelines we set up for them aren’t realistic,” says Catron. “If they don’t show up for an appointment, it may not be because they don’t care. It could be because they don’t have the resources to come in,” he says. “Poverty is a reality that most of our tribal families have to deal with every day.”

### Where Do Advocates Go from Here?

Above all, the emphasis for advocates should be on meeting the requirements of the Indian Child Welfare Act—even when it proves challenging.

“A CASA volunteer carries a lot of weight in the courtroom,” says Stately. “They can say, ‘Wait, this child was recently identified as Native American; let’s do some research before making any other decisions,’” he suggests. His experience is that established CPS timelines can often create a barrier to enacting ICWA. “CPS laws are very timeframe heavy, moving a child quickly through the system,” he says. “It’s up to the CASA volunteer to ask for more time to find culturally appropriate evaluations and resources.”

The advocate also needs to be fully committed to finding culturally appropriate placements that will keep children connected to their extended family and tribal community—regardless of initial barriers.

“Sometimes you might feel you have exhausted all the options within the tribe,” says Rapid City advocate Diane Wilson. “That is when you have to get creative.” In one of her cases involving a young American Indian boy, it was clear after much research that he would be best placed with a non-Native family who had already adopted his non-Native half sibling. The tribal chairman was involved in this decision and agreed that there were not any relatives who could pass a home study. But what the tribe then did was to “adopt” the child’s new adoptive family. The tribe is now making sure that this child is regularly attending tribal events and is immersed in his culture.

All experts interviewed for this article agree that advocates should educate themselves as much as possible about ICWA and the tribal communities they are working with. Taking the time to build relationships and trust can go a long way toward better serving Native children in foster care. And as with all CASA advocacy, open-mindedness and a willingness to learn are essential. These attributes, coupled with cultural sensitivity and dedication to the principles and mandates of ICWA, will help advocates best meet the needs of the Native children they serve. Effective and thoughtful advocacy is perhaps one of the most powerful gifts an American Indian/Alaska Native child in foster care can receive. 📣

*Lisette Austin is a freelance writer who regularly contributes to local and national publications on topics including foster care, multiracial identity and parenting. Austin also has a master’s degree in American Indian studies and works part-time as a research coordinator for the Healing of the Canoe project, a collaboration among the University of Washington, the Suquamish Tribe and the Port Gamble S’Klallam Tribe.*

## Forgotten Children Campaign Goes National

As covered in the summer 2008 issue of *The Connection*, National CASA hosted a media event last May at the foot of the Washington Monument. On each of five days, 850 *Forgotten Children* were represented by life-sized, stand-up displays of youth to represent the number of children who enter foster care each day. The media noticed. By the end of the week, National CASA's *Forgotten Children* event was carried by over 148 media outlets across the country, bringing the CASA volunteer message to more than 14.6 million people.

Local CASA and GAL programs noticed what happened in Washington, DC, as well. National CASA received dozens of requests from programs across the country wanting to produce a *Forgotten Children* event in their communities. Using the stand-up figures from the national display, we were able to accommodate six local *Forgotten Children* events in October and November. The programs were Dallas CASA, Santa Barbara CASA, Tennessee CASA, South Carolina GAL, East Texas CASA and East Central Indiana CASA.

All of the events were successful in furthering awareness of the need for more advocates for foster children. Here are just a few highlights from the three largest happenings: Dallas, Nashville and Santa Barbara.

**Dallas CASA** placed 850 life-sized cutouts of foster children on the lawn of the Kennedy Memorial in downtown Dallas, a magnificent structure built to honor the memory of President John F. Kennedy. The event was co-sponsored by Dallas County Commissioners and received strong judiciary support. Dallas County Commissioners participated alongside Dallas CASA in press conferences, providing additional incentive for media participation. This collaboration was critical to securing the Kennedy Memorial as the location. A great strength of the Dallas

event was the matching of a large visual demonstration with the strong personal story of a local foster youth, Donald Knight. Knight proved to be a compelling spokesperson for media interviews. He and his CASA volunteer, Ron Craig, were the focus of a significant article in *The Dallas Morning News*.

**Tennessee CASA** held its *Forgotten Children* event in the shadow of Nashville's Capitol building. Timed to coincide with the second presidential debate held at nearby Belmont University, the display elicited major television and radio coverage. Local CBS and NBC television affiliates covered the event, as did *The Tennessean* newspaper. Nashville Public Radio also aired the story, which was picked up by National Public Radio. Cheryl Hultman, executive director of the Tennessee CASA Association, noted: "This was a wonderful, rare opportunity to showcase CASA on a national level during an election and to bring our issues to the forefront."



Nashville



Dallas

The *Forgotten Children* event held by **CASA of Santa Barbara County** in California kicked off with an estimated 250 people carrying the foster child cutout displays down State Street to the steady beat of a youth drum corps. These displays joined 600 others already placed in the Santa Barbara County Courthouse Sunken Garden. The event received front-page coverage in the *Santa Barbara News-Press* and was covered by local network broadcast affiliates. Musician Kenny Loggins and his son Crosby entertained the crowd on the lawn. Afterwards, Kenny





Santa Barbara

Loggins expressed interest in doing more for the CASA cause; National CASA is exploring this possibility.

No foster child should ever be forgotten. Our goal is ultimately to bring this powerful reminder into many US communities. National CASA is seeking funding to support more state and local *Forgotten Children* events in 2009 and beyond. The American Legion Child Welfare Foundation has awarded us a grant to produce a toolkit this year for local programs staging events across the country. The kit will provide essential resources, tools and templates, including a website that will enable programs to leverage the display for volunteer recruitment and fundraising in their communities. The foundation is a longtime supporter of National CASA, providing grant funding for volunteer recruitment and training initiatives that benefit the entire CASA network.

## Revamped National CASA Website to Debut in Fourth Quarter

In 2008, there were more than 2.2 million visitor sessions on National CASA's two websites: [nationalcasa.org](http://nationalcasa.org), designed for the general public, and [CASAnet.org](http://CASAnet.org), targeted to CASA programs and volunteers. Users of [nationalcasa.org](http://nationalcasa.org) searched for local CASA programs, read National CASA news and made donations to support our work. Local CASA and GAL program staff and volunteers used [CASAnet.org](http://CASAnet.org) to obtain training materials, to download volunteer recruitment tools and to obtain information about National CASA grants.

Later this year, National CASA will expand the reach and function of the two websites when we launch a redesigned site with a new domain name. [CASAforchildren.org](http://CASAforchildren.org) will replace both [nationalcasa.org](http://nationalcasa.org) and [CASAnet.org](http://CASAnet.org) (though visitors using the old names will be forwarded to the new URL). On this new site, visitors will find the rich resource library that has been contained on [CASAnet](http://CASAnet.org) as well as the volunteer and donor outreach materials housed on [nationalcasa.org](http://nationalcasa.org). In addition, staff, volunteers and the youth we serve will be able to access social networking tools along with enhanced resources and information more readily accessible through robust search capabilities. The more intuitive site will enhance recruitment and retention of volunteers and donors as well as training and resources for current volunteers. We are incorporating a number of new features based on input from a survey completed by nearly 4,000 CASA program staff and volunteers.

Funding for the website redesign was provided by many National CASA supporters. Foremost among them are the US Department of Justice's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (our primary source of funding), Jewelers for Children and the American Legion Child Welfare Foundation.



## Media Outreach by Judge Hatchett and Former Foster Youth Julia Charles

National CASA spokesperson Judge Glenda Hatchett carried out a five-hour national radio tour in November. She was joined by former foster youth and national FosterClub All-Star Julia Charles. Charles spoke at our last National CASA conference in Washington, DC, and is featured in this issue's "Book Club." The tour included 22 interviews with radio stations across the country, including the nationally syndicated *Doug Banks Show*. Both Charles and Hatchett spoke passionately about the need for more CASA volunteers to serve children in foster care.

The media tour was picked up by 180 radio stations in 97 cities across the US. The total number of listeners reached by the CASA message is estimated to be over 650,000. 📻



## *Surviving the Storm: The Life of a Child in Foster Care*

By Julia S. Charles

© 2008 Independent Living Resources (ilrinc.com); 94 pages, including notes for group discussion as well as advice for parents, caregivers, social workers and professionals

Julia Charles's account of her journey through the foster care system, *Surviving the Storm*, unveils to its readers a painful glimpse of what life was like for her growing up in care. She recounts the "storm" that was her life. While her experiences left her scarred, Charles's story is ultimately one of overcoming. The real strength of her book lies in the perspective she brings to the situation as an alumnus of our child welfare system.

In the book, Charles describes the circumstances of her decade in foster care. For Charles, as for many children, her time in the system was anything but consistent or stable. During those ten years, she had sixteen placements, was shuttled among nine schools, ran away from "home" on six occasions and had seven social workers. While these numbers do not do justice to the many hardships she had to endure, they do convey the sense of constant upheaval that marked Charles's childhood.

What Charles does so well in this book is to bring her reader down to eye level with herself as a child growing up in the system. While Charles describes for us the conditions of her time in foster care, she also brings to life much of what she was thinking and feeling while being bounced around the system. In doing so, she allows her readers to witness much of the trauma she endured as a child.

Charles describes her feelings of being unwanted and unloved by so many people in her life; she asks, regarding her biological mother, "How could I change to make her love me?"

She describes coping with loss and separation. She talks about trying to memorize her brothers' features "just in case [she] would have to find them later in life." She tells what it was like to be always the "odd girl out," whether at school, at camp or in a new foster home. She describes how, at a young age, she became anorexic to gain some sense of control over at least one part of her life. She admits, "I could not control where I lived. I could no longer control my relationships... there was something I could control—food." Charles tells of being afraid of those who were supposed to be her caretakers. She describes being

## Julia Charles's Advice to Readers

As a person who has "graduated" from foster care, who knows herself better after her long personal storm and who, following a harrowing time of self-abasement, loves herself finally for who she is, Charles feels responsible to give a positive message to youth currently in foster care and to improve the foster care system itself. She expresses a hope that people not only read but learn and grow from her story. With this in mind, the last section of the book is designed to guide discussion and to provide insight and advice to people involved in the system:

- **Numbers by Julia** is a remarkable list. For Charles, as for many youth in foster care, the numbers define her life: number of years passed in foster care, of placements, of school changes, of people she physically hurt, of foster siblings and social workers, etc. To help the reader discuss this list, questions follow. For example, which number was most helpful or detrimental to Charles's survival? How do the numbers reflect the youth's resilience?
- **Youth Talk** is Charles's straight-forward, positive talk with her peers. In it she suggests actions—such as listening to foster parents, trusting

someone and building healthy relationships—which can aid them in not only surviving their personal storms but also provide a firm base on which to build their lives.

- **Charles's Advice for Parents and Caregivers** reflects her experience as a foster child who had been in kinship care as well as an adoptive home. She did find love and faith while living with people who cared for her. Here, she highlights qualities which she feels can create a positive relationship between adults and youth in their care. She advises caregivers to relax and allow the youth to approach first, to connect with them and to encourage youth to stand on their own feet.
- **In Advice for Social Workers and Professionals**, Charles reminds those who deal with foster youth that their role is to help develop the youth's self-sufficiency and safety. She suggests that they listen to and respect the experience of both foster parents and youth, continue to update their knowledge and share that knowledge with everyone involved in a case. Finally, she says that after professionals have done all they can to prepare the foster youth, it is time to let go and allow the youth to build his or her own world.

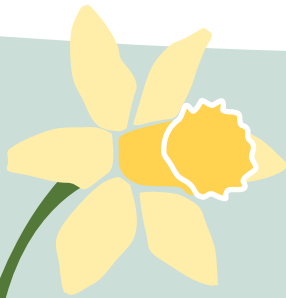
regularly embarrassed and humiliated in front of her peers by having to carry a trash bag full of her clothes to school because she moved so often.

While at times it was difficult to read the accounts of what Charles had to live through, her experiences

effectively underscore the great need to improve the child welfare system.

As indicated in the title, Charles's story is one of survival. Now in her mid-20s, she is a college graduate and a published author. She has managed to fashion the difficult circumstances

of her life into a tool to improve the foster care system. Julia Charles now travels the country sharing her life story with social workers, foster parents and caregivers as well as young people in foster care with the intent of making the system work better. 📢



## *Just in Time for Mother's Day*

Watch [nationalcasa.org](http://nationalcasa.org) in early May for a new custom jewelry piece from partner Fred Meyer/Littman Jewelers.



Fred Meyer Jewelers has been an important national supporter of the CASA cause for abused children, donating over \$20,000 since 2007. Even more impact comes from their promotion of volunteer advocacy, so far putting the CASA name in 15 million jewelry catalogs, newspaper circulars and credit-card inserts.

*Fred Meyer* JEWELERS

LITTMAN  JEWELERS

### GET CONNECTED!

The National CASA Association hosts several websites of interest to anyone who values promoting and supporting quality volunteer advocacy to help assure each child a safe, permanent, nurturing home. Visit the following sites to learn more.

#### NationalCASA.org

The National CASA website is one of the strongest resources for recruiting new volunteers and supporters for state and local CASA/GAL programs. The website contains volunteer stories along with information on recruitment, public relations activities, news and donating to National CASA.



#### CASAnet.org

CASAnet is designed to meet the needs of CASA program staff and volunteers, including the advocate's library, program tools, updated information on national initiatives and other material for download.

#### NationalCASA.org/JudgesPage

This webpage is dedicated to judges who hear child welfare cases. Content is valuable to other child advocates as well.

#### ShopCASA.org

A broad assortment of support materials and CASA/GAL promotional items is available through the ShopCASA site.





# 5 Ways to Advocate for Educational Success

Randee Kaitcer  
Casework Supervisor  
CASA of Tarrant County  
Fort Worth, TX

When the 1<sup>st</sup>-grade teacher of one of the children I advocate for notified me of an upcoming Admission, Review and Dismissal meeting, I knew I had to attend. I am glad I did, as I negotiated one extra occupational therapy session in a six-week period. It was difficult for me to accept the school's goal of "adequate" progress when I wanted "maximum possible" progress. One 30-minute session was not a big victory, but it was a victory nonetheless.

Volunteer advocates and parents frequently have questions regarding how best to advocate for a child's educational needs, which are sometimes overlooked. Below are a few pointers on how to help children improve their educational stability and enjoy a high-quality school experience:

### 1. Make education a top priority.

Talk with the child about the importance of school in their lives. For younger children, you can explain the vital link between what they learn in the classroom (English) and real life work (writing a report for your boss). Or the connection between science and preparing a meal for yourself. For older youth, talk about the "million-dollar ticket"—not a lottery ticket but a high school diploma. Studies show that having high expectations for a youth's educational achievement is the single most important factor in a child's educational success. Be a cheerleader for the child. Go to their school play, choir concert and volleyball game. Becoming involved demonstrates how important you consider school.

### 2. Develop good relationships with school personnel.

This includes the teacher, of course, but also the secretary who answers the phone, the principal and the counselor. They may have a special understanding of the child; if so, they can support you in helping the child deal with any problems. For example, ask the teacher to send home a written note describing a child's behavior problem, such as acting out, rather than relaying the day's events verbally in front of the child. This saves the child embarrassment. With a little bit of information, school personnel may be more understanding of particular behaviors. Develop and encourage open communication between yourself and the school; email is a wonderful tool for this purpose if you and the teacher are comfortable with it.

### 3. Talk directly to teachers about their classroom expectations.

The teacher is your ally in a child's education. To be a knowledgeable, effective advocate for the child, you should be assertive yet courteous and respectful of educational professionals. Know the child's rights, and request the proper services firmly yet not combatively. Be a resource for the teacher—you may be the only person who knows the child's educational history. Understand that the teacher has other children in the classroom to consider as well.

### 4. Ensure that the child has an educational portfolio.

The parent or guardian should maintain a variety of documents for the child. These include enrollment



## Questions for Volunteers to Ask Teachers

1. What are this child's strengths in school?
2. What are his weaknesses in school?
3. Are there gaps in her education? At what grade level is she performing? Is she on target? Is this an appropriate grade level for this child? If not, what is the appropriate grade level?
4. Is he failing classes?
5. Has she ever been retained?
6. Does he receive/need tutoring? If so, in what subjects?
7. Did she receive any special services at her previous school?
8. Does he have behavior problems at school that affect his learning?
9. Does she have attention problems at school that make it difficult to learn? Has she been diagnosed with ADD/ADHD?
10. Has he been diagnosed with (or is he suspected to have) any of the following disabilities that might affect his education: autism, auditory impairment, visual impairment, speech impairment, traumatic brain injury, orthopedic impairment, mental retardation or emotional disturbance? If yes, what special education services are available?

*Adapted from Casey Family Programs*

records (birth certificate, social security number, immunization records, withdrawal forms from previous schools), report cards and progress reports. Any special education records should be kept as well. Examples are Section 504 plans, most recent Full and Individual Evaluations, Individual Education Programs and Behavior Intervention Plans. Also include standardized test scores, list of medications taken during the school day, school photos, referrals, notices and correspondence (emails, notes on phone calls or meetings), awards/honors and student handbooks. For older children, parents and guardians will also want to understand the school's requirements for graduation

and SAT registration dates. Youth need support and preparation to make the transition from high school to college or employment. Is there a workshop or conference the parent or child can attend?

**5. Ensure that someone is serving as the child's educational advocate—whether that be you or someone else.**

Many children in the US receive special education services at some point in their schooling. Consult with your student and the teacher, review the educational records, and attend any meetings. At these meetings, be sure to read through and thoroughly discuss all paperwork. Ask lots of

"why" questions, and make sure your student's goals and objectives are specific. Learn about community educational resources available to meet the needs of the child.

As you can see, there is much you can do as an advocate or parent to help children access a stable and productive education. Your active participation can make a lifelong difference for a child. 📣

**Editor's Note:** A more extensive version of this article is available online. From [nationalcasa.org](http://nationalcasa.org), click on "Volunteer" and then on "Support for Volunteers." The "Tips" link appears at the top of the right-hand column.

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

### Conference Highlights:

- Hear from National CASA supporters Dr. Phil and Robin McGraw and leadership consultant Gloria Burgess.
- Choose from more than 60 workshops and the following workshop tracks: Youth Voice, Fostering Connections to Success Act, Fundraising and Cultural Competency.
- Learn from more than 1,400 colleagues from across the country.

### New Discounts Make the Conference More Affordable:

- Take advantage of increased volunteer discount: Volunteers receive \$70 off of the regular conference registration price. Additional discounts for students/youth and members are available.
- Enjoy travel savings through 2009 conference partners United Airlines and local airport shuttle companies.

For more information, visit [casanet.org/conference](http://casanet.org/conference), call the conference hotline (888) 805-8978 or email [ncasa-reg@nationalcasa.org](mailto:ncasa-reg@nationalcasa.org).



**Register at [casanet.org/conference](http://casanet.org/conference) by March 20, 2009.**

## Preparing Emancipated Youth for Positive Contact with Birth Families

In research conducted by Casey Family Programs, 88% of surveyed youth had elected to contact their birth families after leaving foster care. Casey practitioners and researchers published an article that discusses preparing youth for contact with birth families and the benefits that may come from contact. To read the article from *Focus*, a newsletter published by the Foster Family-Based Treatment Association, go to [ffta.org/publications/focus\\_archives.html](http://ffta.org/publications/focus_archives.html). Click on the Fall 2008 link and look for "Contact with Birth Families After Emancipation: Results from Two Alumni Studies and Implications for Practice."

## Casey Highlights Long-Term Trends in Child Welfare

Casey Family Programs has begun issuing data briefs to highlight positive, long-term trends associated with each state's progress towards achieving the goals the organization has articulated as part of its strategy for the year 2020 ([casey.org/AboutCasey/2020Strategy](http://casey.org/AboutCasey/2020Strategy)). The briefs link trends and practice improvements to successful outcomes for children in foster care. Casey and other organizations will use these results to inform and improve other child welfare systems' efforts across the country. The first 2020 data brief showcases Texas's reduction in the number of children in out-of-home care. The second explains how the California Breakthrough Series Collaborative on Disproportionality might affect the number of children of color in the state's foster care system. Visit the data briefs page at [casey.org/Resources/Publications/2020DataBriefs.htm](http://casey.org/Resources/Publications/2020DataBriefs.htm).

## Improving Higher Education Outcomes for Students from Foster Care

College can confer on youth the ability to choose a future rich with possibilities. A new framework from Casey Family Programs describes how to create a system of support for young people from foster care seeking postsecondary education opportunities. The framework provides program development tools for college counselors, administrators, professors and staff. It also helps education professionals define a plan for improving their institution's support for students from foster care. To read the publication, go to [casey.org/Resources/Publications/HigherEdFramework.htm](http://casey.org/Resources/Publications/HigherEdFramework.htm).

## Among Poor Families, Greater Work Effort Associated with Better Child Outcomes

Greater work effort by poor families is associated with better child outcomes, according to a new Child Trends research brief, *The Well-Being of Children in Working Poor and Other Families: 1997 and 2004*, based on data from the Survey of Income and Program Participation. At the time welfare reform was implemented in 1997, there was concern that new work requirements imposed on mothers by the new Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program might lead to deterioration in child well-being, since mothers would have less time available to spend with their children. While work efforts of single mothers did indeed increase, the findings reported here suggest instead that many child well-being measures have risen for children in working poor families. Go to [childtrends.org](http://childtrends.org), click on Publications and then E-newsletters, then look for the September 30, 2008 issue.

## New Programs Offer Potential Solutions to Judges, Advocates and Lawyers

Several new programs from the University of Washington's award-winning television channel UWTV examine the unique challenges and emerging innovative strategies of our court systems. Presented by the university's School of Law's Court Improvement Training Academy through the Washington State Administrative Office of the Courts, these new videos feature distinguished speakers analyzing current court systems and exploring new approaches. UWTV offers live webstreaming, podcasting and more than 1,000 videos on demand at [uwtv.org](http://uwtv.org). New releases include the following:

- In the two-part *Reasonable Efforts and Court Improvement*, Judge Leonard P. Edwards, a judge-in-residence with the California Administrative Office of the Courts and former National CASA board member, outlines the problems that riddle the current juvenile court system. Powerful first-hand interviews demonstrate how a holistic approach can help families in crisis heal.
- In *Substance Abuse Treatment for Child Welfare Families*, Steven J. Ondersma, PhD, L.P., assistant professor at Wayne State University School of Medicine, reveals recent research into substance abuse in the context of the child welfare system. He raises new perspectives about the effectiveness of current strategies and what alternatives might work better.
- *The Racial Geography of Child Welfare* features Dorothy Roberts, a Harvard Law School graduate and the Kirkland & Ellis Professor of Law at Northwestern University Law School. Roberts argues that the overwhelming number of African-American children in foster care is a result of racial bias.
- *Reasonable Efforts Symposium: Best Practices in Dependency-Planned, Purposeful and Progressive Visits* shows how to conduct safe and successful visits within the child welfare system.

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# CASA Program Serves American Indian Children in State *and* Tribal Courts

Richard Davidson, MSW, MPA, LSW  
Executive Director  
Okmulgee County Family Resource Center

Kim Deer, MA  
CASA Program Manager  
Okmulgee County/Muscogee (Creek) Nation CASA



In 1987, the Okmulgee County/Muscogee (Creek) Nation CASA Program was formed and began training volunteer advocates to serve children in the state courts of two rural Oklahoma counties: Okmulgee and Okfuskee. Our program originated and developed as a joint venture among local citizens and representatives of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation Tribe of Oklahoma. The impetus was that the state courts were serving a disproportionate population of American Indian children. As Jane Berger mentioned in the “Volunteer Voice” feature that opened this issue, the word *Creek* is in parentheses in our program name because that is the term used by the US government; however tribe members call themselves *Muscogee*. To save space, we will refer to our program as the Okmulgee/Muscogee CASA Program in the remainder of this article.

As volunteers began advocating for children in our juvenile courts, they noticed that maltreatment of children was frequently accompanied by a broader pattern of domestic violence within families. In response to this need, the Okmulgee County Family Resource Center incorporated in 1990 to provide umbrella administration for both the Okmulgee/Muscogee CASA Program and a domestic violence component—the Safehouse Program. The collaboration among local citizens and the Muscogee Nation grew even

stronger through this new organization, and tribal representation on our governing board was formalized in our corporate bylaws.

Organizationally, two further developments have led to the Okmulgee/Muscogee CASA Program of today:

- In 2005, local political pressure led Oklahoma legislative leaders and the Oklahoma CASA Association to form a new CASA program in Creek County, a large suburban jurisdiction adjoining Tulsa. The Okmulgee/Muscogee CASA Program was invited to undertake this project to consolidate CASA programming within the 24<sup>th</sup> Judicial District. After two years, our new Creek County CASA Program had trained 40 volunteers and served over 70 children.
- With continued tribal grant funding through National CASA in 2008, our program serving Creek Nation children in tribal court became much more specialized. Before this time, volunteers were trained in one generic curriculum and then assigned cases in either state or tribal court. They then had to learn the practices of each court “on-the-fly.” Now we are able to provide six trainings each year, with three focused on service in state court and three on service in tribal court. Volunteers come into the program with the expectation of serving in one venue or the other. The tribal training is much more intensely focused on the important laws and issues of Native American citizenship rather than state or US citizenship. Also, these volunteers are consistently

trained by tribal members and tribal court professionals. To allow for this specialization in recruitment, training and supervision, a staff position was dedicated to the role of volunteer coordinator and consultant for tribal advocates.

Today the Okmulgee/Muscogee CASA Program serves four juvenile courts—the three state courts of the 24<sup>th</sup> Judicial District of Oklahoma and the Muscogee (Creek) Nation Tribal Court.

During July 2008, the three state courts supervised 323 foster children. Of these, 161 were from American Indian families. Additionally, the Muscogee (Creek) Nation Tribal Court supervises approximately 125 children, all removed from tribal families and placed in foster care. While the challenges of diversity look different to almost every program, the job of Okmulgee/Muscogee CASA Program staff in recruiting and training advocates to best serve Native children has led to a variety of unanticipated obstacles, specialized strategies and unprecedented successes.

Currently, our program has 74 CASA volunteers advocating for 157 children in the three state courts and the tribal court. We are up to serving 35% of children in care, and growing. With over 50% of these children being American Indian, it has not yet been possible to assign each child a Native volunteer. So our goal is to educate non-Native volunteers on

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the importance of American Indian cultures and advocating effectively for these children.

When training non-Native volunteers to work with Indian children, it is critical to educate the volunteer on cultural differences. Bias and prejudice have cultural roots. We have learned that simply facilitating a class on diversity will not erase these biases. Enhancing diversity is more than “tolerating” people who are from a different culture; it means enthusiastically welcoming and involving them.

In an effort to increase this involvement and to provide volunteers with more in-depth training, the Okmulgee/Muscogee CASA Program collaborates with the Muscogee (Creek) Nation to provide quarterly in-service trainings. A representative from the tribe

facilitates a lesson on the Indian Child Welfare Act and cultural diversity for each CASA training class. The tribe also offers a tour of its complex to training classes, allowing new volunteers to see the inner dynamics of a tribal organization.

Both Native and non-Native CASA volunteers have done a wonderful job of immersing themselves within a culture that tends to be very private. Once there is an understanding that the CASA volunteer is there to advocate for children in need, the importance of their role becomes apparent to tribal members. Although there are many factors in advocating successfully for American Indian children, those most critical are understanding, acceptance and commitment to the importance of the child’s tribe and culture. 📣



### ***Rights and Resources for Pregnant and Parenting Girls in Foster Care***

The National Crittenton Foundation recently released *Rights and Resources* to address the absence of information about custody and placement options available to young mothers in foster care. By age 19, more than a third of young women in care report having at least one child, compared to just 12% of their peers not in care, according to the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy. Information about the numbers of pregnant and parenting teens in foster care is scarce, as are services that specifically address the needs of this population. The guide was made possible in part by a grant from the Annie E. Casey Foundation. An electronic version of the handbook, including state-by-state resource listings, is available at [thenationalcrittentonfoundation.org/rights\\_and\\_resources.asp](http://thenationalcrittentonfoundation.org/rights_and_resources.asp).

### ***New Housing Resource Supports Family Reunification***

CASA/GAL volunteers should keep their local housing authority in mind as a resource when researching possibilities for family reunification. In November, the US Department of Housing and Urban Development issued a notice of funding availability inviting public housing authorities nationwide to apply for a portion of \$20 million in new Section 8 Housing Choice Vouchers for the Family Unification Program (FUP). FUP provides homeless and poorly housed parents involved in the child welfare system with decent and affordable housing as well as supportive services to safely reunite them with their children. FUP vouchers are also available to prevent homelessness among former foster youth. For more information, visit the National Center for Housing and Child Welfare’s website at [nchcw.org](http://nchcw.org). 📣



## Back to School Fashion Show

GAL Program 7<sup>th</sup> Judicial Circuit, Daytona, FL



Left to right: Barbara Jacobi, case coordinator for the St. Augustine GAL office, and Barrie Michaels, GAL circuit recruiter, join JCP Cares representatives Anne Marie Gennusa, Jeralyn Forcier and Kathy Bravo.

This fall, the Julington Creek Plantation service organization JCP Cares conducted a children's *Back to School Fashion Show* in the Belk's Kids Department to help the St. John's County office of the Florida GAL Program 7<sup>th</sup> Judicial Circuit and the children they serve. More than 200 people attended the event, raising nearly \$4,000 in addition to obtaining school supplies and press coverage. Belk's sponsored the event and provided free clothing for the fashion show as well as hairdressers for the volunteer models, who were children of JCP Cares members. The event was covered by two major news stations and four newspapers as well as featured on three prominent websites. GAL Circuit Recruiter Barrie Michaels said, "It was great to see kids



Some of the young models

helping kids. This was a wonderful event and very innovative in its use of the entire community."

## Dancing with Savannah Stars

Savannah-Chatham County CASA, GA

Savannah community leaders drew in donations while dancing the night away at the CASA for Children annual fundraiser. Titled *Dancing with Savannah Stars*, the event raised more than \$30,000 to support the advocates of neglected and abused children in the city. CASA Board President Tammie Mosley, as a huge fan of the hit series *Dancing with the Stars*, made her favorite show become a local reality. The eight selected "Savannah Stars" were each paired with a veteran dancer, spending months in grueling practice before competing in front of the crowd. "This was a huge collaboration with the community. We had representation from every possible source in Savannah. Everyone cared!" Mosley said.



Savannah Chatham Metropolitan Police Department Chief Michael Berkow with Lisa Clark (©JT Blatty)

## Off the Newswire

In the November 2008 issue of *Mature Living*, Beth Dessem, state director of the Missouri CASA Association and a member of the National CASA Board of Trustees, was featured in an article about quilting. "Piece by Piece" described her initial contact with the CASA mission after reading Gay Courter's *I Speak for this Child: True Stories of a Child Advocate*. Formerly a teacher, Dessem focused on children in a new way. She says, "To be an advocate means to step into someone else's shoes, understand what they need and then communicate that for them to someone else."



## Awards

**Peg Johnson** is many things—a singer, dancer, 2005 magna cum laude graduate of New Hampshire College and a CASA volunteer since 2006. But this 78-year-old Londonderry resident is also the recently crowned Ms. Senior New Hampshire. In declaring August 4, 2008, as *Peg Johnson Day*, Governor Lynch highlighted Johnson's work for CASA and the Londonderry Senior Center. In describing what the CASA program means to her, Johnson stated, "Every time I go to court on behalf of my CASA child, I feel that I am making a contribution towards making a child's life better. The day that my CASA child was adopted was so wonderful and one of the most gratifying moments of my life." Johnson's CASA supervisor, Kathleen McArdle, commented, "I am so proud of Peg. She is a beautiful, gracious lady, and the children of New Hampshire are fortunate to have her as their advocate."



Roanoke Valley CASA volunteer **Linda LeFever** read *The Connection* to a young friend after receiving a *Golden Halo Award*. Presented at Roanoke College in Virginia, the *Golden Halo Award* was established to honor professionals who work with the Children's Trust and the CASA program as advocates. GALs, social workers, judges, police officers, health professionals and CASA volunteers were nominated for this award. LeFever was nominated by a family she worked with.



CASA volunteers **Gerald and Iris L. Sakats** were recently inducted into the Chesterfield Senior Volunteer Hall of Fame. The hall of fame comprises residents of this Virginian county who have made outstanding volunteer contributions after the age of 65. Gerald Sakats, a retired electrical engineer, and homemaker Iris L. Sakats have volunteered with Chesterfield CASA, Inc. for seven years and have jointly advocated for 12 children. Gail Sutler, chair of the Hall of Fame Committee, said, "Some of our [18] nominees had...2,000 or more hours of volunteer service to those in need in our community. The selection panel had the difficult task of selecting only three."



**Ann Caulkins**, a case supervisor for the Alexandria/Arlington CASA Program in Virginia, was honored by the Governor's Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect for her many years of commitment to the prevention and treatment of child abuse and neglect. In addition to being a CASA staff member, Caulkins is a committed volunteer.



(From left): Alexandria/Arlington CASA Program Director Carrie Cannon, Scott Caulkins, Award Winner Ann Caulkins and Stop Child Abuse Now (SCAN) of Northern Virginia Executive Director Diane Charles

She and her husband Scott have served 60 children over the years by providing short-term emergency and respite foster care.

The **CASA First Judicial District of Santa Fe, NM**, was one of five recipients of a *Piñon Award*, recognizing exemplary work by nonprofits in Santa Fe and northern New Mexico. The awards are given by the Santa Fe Community Foundation. Executive Director Janice Quinn said, "It is a great honor to be recognized by the community as a valuable partner in making positive change. While the \$2,500 cash award is definitely welcomed, we couldn't buy the public recognition and program awareness that winning a *Piñon* has provided. Other foundations have contacted us to find out more about our programs, and volunteer applications are pouring in!"



(From left): CASA volunteer Eleni Cahn, Executive Director Janice Quinn, Volunteer Coordinators Molly Fisher and Lisa Church join Erica Padilla, member of the CASA program's advisory board and a former foster child.

The fifth annual *National City Children's Champion Award* was given to **CASA of Cook County, IL**. This statewide recognition, which honors organizations that help children to be healthy, happy, safe, loved and well educated, was presented at the annual Kids Count awards dinner. The award, with a check for \$10,000 from National City, is granted in partnership with Voices for Illinois Children, an organization that champions the full development and well-being of every child in the state.



Joseph A. Gregoire, president of National City-Illinois Banking, presents award to Lanetta Haynes, executive director of CASA of Cook County.

**Helen Norris**, Pawnee CASA director, received the *Sonja Atetewuthtaketa Award for Distinguished Service* in the protection of Native American children at the 16<sup>th</sup> Oklahoma Conference on Child Abuse and Neglect and Healthy Children. Besides being instrumental in establishing the Pawnee CASA program, Norris has dedicated herself to ensuring that the American Indian children of Pawnee County and of the Pawnee Nation are provided with an advocate to stand up for them in court.



(From left) Phyllis Jeffcoat, Alice Carrol, June Hamilton, Dr. Dee BigFoot, Helen Norris and Angie Echohawk

Toyota of Muskogee, OK, chose **CASA for Children, Inc., Muskogee**, as their featured charity in a one-page advertisement in *Time* magazine. The ad was donated when the program won the Toyota *President's Award*. During Child Abuse Prevention Month, the Toyota dealership made a donation to the CASA program for every car sold. Toyota of Muskogee President James Hodge said, "Young victims need CASA as an ally. Its efforts to stop child abuse are critical and deserve all the support we can provide." 🗣️



Toyota of Muskogee President James Hodge (left) and General Manager Rick Hamm with CASA Executive Director Kathryn Eaton



## Puerta Plata



*Carole J. Ritter, executive director of Sumner County CASA in Gallatin, TN, visited the Dominican Republic last April with her two adopted daughters, Danielle (15), holding The Connection, and Brittney (14). The two girls are seen here with a young man they met on their travels in Puerta Plata.*

*"The great thing about this photo is that my daughters are adopted and were CASA children of the Davidson County, TN, program. They truly epitomize all the things CASA advocates for. They were in and out of foster care for seven years. When Suzanne Harrison, their former volunteer who is now employed by the Davidson County program, entered their life, things started being monitored more closely. She worked diligently to find permanency for my girls. They would be honored to have their picture in our Connection because they want their story to be heard."*

—Carole Ritter

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:  
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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](mailto:theconnection@nationalcasa.org). Include your name, address, phone number, email address and photo location.





# Parent Power

Judge Glenda A. Hatchett  
National CASA Spokesperson

**T**his fall, I held “Parent Power” workshops in nine US cities, free and open to the public. The focus was on

strengthening families by empowering parents. At each city, between 150 and 700 people attended. The impetus for this adventure was the many questions I receive from concerned parents. People come up to me on a daily basis and say, “I need help!” So it has been on my heart to do this for some time. I hope it will be an ongoing series starting up again in the spring.

I was happy to see so many CASA and GAL volunteers at the workshops. In Memphis, the program set up a table in the lobby to provide information to participants. The CASA program in Atlanta gave continuing education credit to its volunteers who attended. And in Jackson, TN, a woman walked up to me and said, “I’m a CASA volunteer because of you!” I am always delighted to hear that.

Parents were eager to participate in the question-and-answer session that made up the second half of each two-hour conference. The first hour was a presentation I call “The Three Cs: Concern, Consistency and Cheering for Our Children.” I will concentrate on the first *C* in this column and discuss the other two in future articles.

There is no doubt that parents I meet are *concerned* about their children. But we must also have watchful eyes. We have to pay attention to what our children are doing, who they’re doing it with and where they’re doing it.

It was not long ago that I had teenagers at home. Older youth want autonomy. And I believe that children should have independence and responsibility that is age appropriate. But you also have to be mindful and ask questions. The practice of dropping teens at the mall at 10 a.m. and picking them up at 6 p.m.—with no idea of who they are hanging out with—is a prescription for disaster. I see good kids end up in court on shoplifting charges, or worse. These are children whom you would never imagine doing such things. But they ended up with the wrong crowd.

We should not feel that we are imposing when we ask our children questions. I had a teen tell me in my courtroom, “Well my mom gets on my nerves because she gets in my business.” I looked at him and said, “You *are* her business!” Be clear, and do not be intimidated when your children push back. When I was a teen, I could not go to a party at somebody’s house unless my parents knew where I was going and spoke to the parents. You may feel old-fashioned asking these questions, and your children may not want to answer. But if your instincts tell you that you should know more about a situation, ask.

Another facet of concern is paying strict attention to what is happening in your child’s school. Poor school performance is one of the biggest red flags indicating that things may not be going well in your child’s life. And just as children have homework, the parents at my workshops have homework as well. One assignment for this topic is to write a note to each of your children’s teachers. For example, “I’m John Brown, and Nick Brown is my son. We are expecting greatness from him. We want to partner with you. Tell us what we can do to support you in keeping Nick on the right track.” Or it could be as simple as “Please call me.” This does two things. First, it puts the teacher on notice that you are a concerned parent. Second, it tells your child that you are watching and that you care.

The second piece of homework for concern is to regularly ask your children, “How was your day?” Do not let them get away with answering, “OK” or “Nothing happened in school today.” Get in the habit of engaging your children every day in a conversation. It can be short, but make it meaningful. And be prepared to listen. Remember: The younger they are when you start this habit, the more likely they are to continue the dialog when they get older and it becomes *critical* for you to know what happened today. 🗉

*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! See her website for more information: [glendahatchett.com](http://glendahatchett.com).*

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