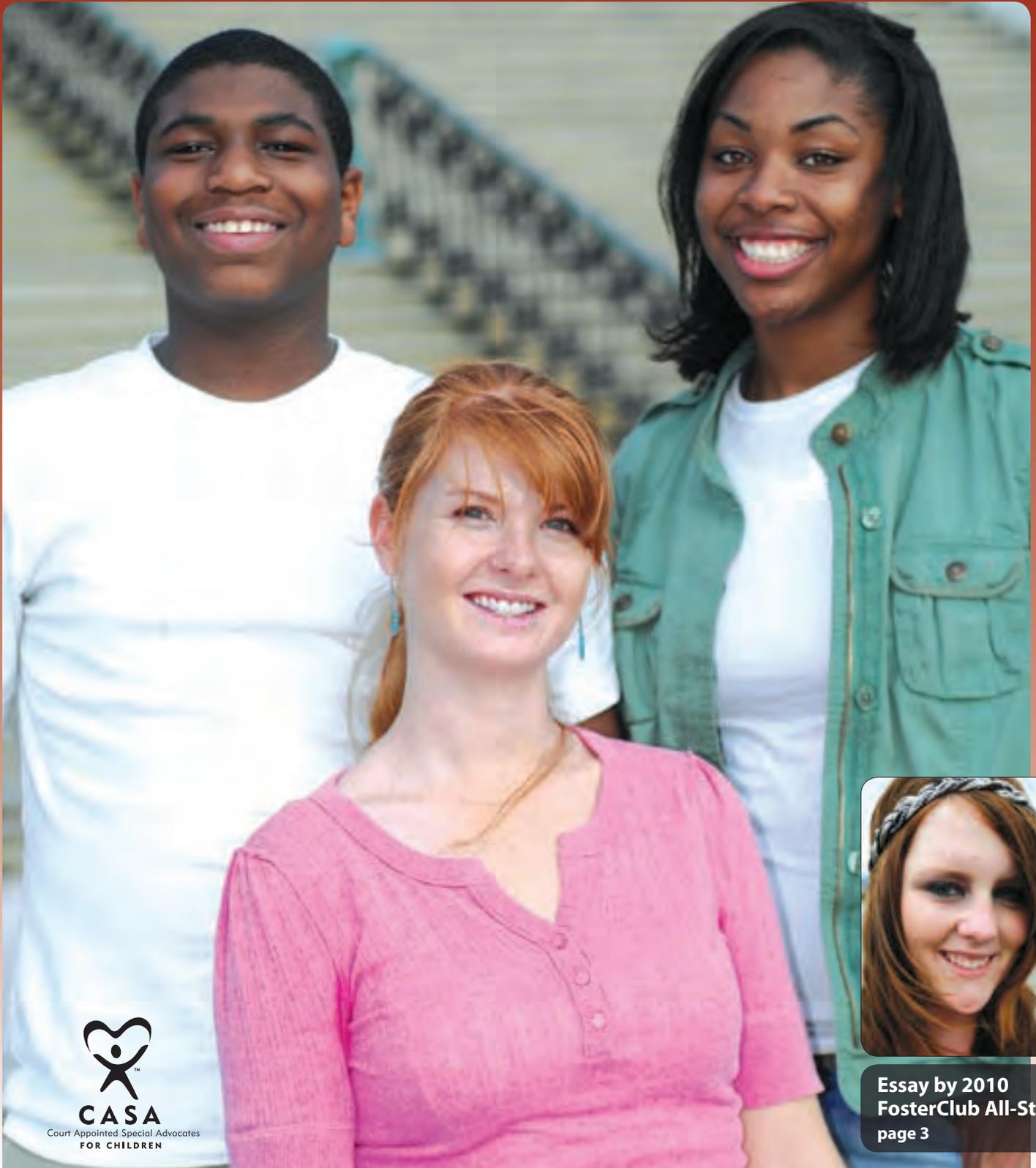


# THE Connection

News and Information from the National Court Appointed Special Advocate Association



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## volunteer voice

### Ann Garnier

Volunteer  
Alameda County CASA  
San Leandro, CA

A friend introduced me to my local CASA program. She was on the board and invited me to a fundraiser. I was very moved by the stories several youth and volunteers shared. On a personal level, the mission resonated very strongly because my oldest brother is a former foster youth. On a professional level, it struck me that my experience in developing case management programs for the healthcare industry could translate to becoming a CASA volunteer.

After the event, I mentioned to my friend that when my busy schedule slowed down I'd really like to volunteer. That day came a few years later when I decided to take a one-year sabbatical to travel and undertake a challenging volunteer opportunity. The CASA program seemed like the perfect fit for me. It's been over six years now, and I've worked with six teenage youth. All were girls residing in group homes; five were parents of an infant or toddler.

My assignment to teen girls who were parenting was purely accidental. My case supervisor and I were both surprised to learn that my first two assigned youth each had a child. When my supervisor asked me if I was okay working with teen parents, having no children of my own, I very naively said, "No problem!" I was already laser focused on emancipation planning, which was right around the corner for both youth. What I didn't realize is that all of their challenges revolved around having young children. The girls couldn't attend school, work or go to independent living classes without childcare, which is difficult to secure.

I don't know who was more anxious those first months—me or the youth. I was a new volunteer and knew very little about teen girls and nothing about babies. The girls were skeptical about me. But they really needed help preparing for emancipation, so I think they decided to take a chance on an inexperienced volunteer. There were so many areas we worked on—and a few crisis situations—in such a short period that we bonded quickly. I tell new volunteers who are concerned that they haven't bonded with their youth to just wait until a crisis occurs. The youth will soon realize that the one person to be counted on for advocacy and support is the CASA volunteer.

While working with any teen parent is a challenge, my biggest was being assigned to a 15-year-old mom with anger management and behavioral issues. She routinely had explosive anger episodes, acted disrespectfully, lied and manipulated people. The youth I had worked with previously—while not perfect—treated me with respect, and we got along well. I was a little taken aback to find myself a target for this youth's anger and deception, particularly when I called her out on bad behavior.

The first few months dealing with her anger were very demanding. At one point I didn't know if I could continue with the

case and had to dig very deep within myself to find the strength to go on. But it struck me that as volunteers we can't just work with kids who are easy to get along with or who are highly motivated. All foster youth deserve a chance to have the support of a CASA volunteer. So I stuck with it, and at the end of six months I saw small but encouraging signs of positive change.

This young woman, now 20, has come a long way. Her anger management and behavioral issues have all but disappeared. Her transition to independence could have gone a little more smoothly, but she and her 5-year-old daughter live in a safe, stable home, and she is working on her GED and employment.

Looking back over the years, I can see that having a volunteer made a difference to all six youth I've worked with—even those who are still struggling to cross the bridge to adult independence. Each youth has told me in her own words that it's the permanent connection with a stable, caring, non-judgmental adult that means the most to them. You and

I often take these relationships for granted, but a foster youth has few if any reliable connections.

I feel extremely fortunate that most of these young women have chosen to stay in touch long past emancipation. These relationships have meant a great deal to me as a volunteer. I've realized it's not only the youth who benefit from the connection. CASA volunteers benefit too! 📣



# Justice and Children's Best Interests

Michael S. Piraino  
National CASA CEO



I have been looking back recently at the many descriptions former foster youth have shared with me about their experiences growing up—both in foster care and before. I've been writing down the words they used to describe how they felt about their lives. Here is what I found. Some words are repeated over and over: *lost, alone, worthless, unheard, hopeless*. This does not sound very promising, yet every one of these young people has within them the strength and the desire to succeed and to do all they can to make sure that no one else has to write their life history in such words.

One word was missing from all of the young people's life stories: *justice*. This seems about right when you look at the record—the huge racial inequities within child welfare systems, the disturbing sense that the system gives up too easily on older youth, the damaging effects on child development that result from separation and impermanence. It cannot be a just world that tolerates such treatment for any of its young people. It is against all our best values that these circumstances still exist in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Our country can do better for these kids. Yes, we have economic problems. Yes, there is reason to be concerned about the ability of political leadership to come together to solve social problems. But children and their well-being are not a partisan issue, and the case for doing justice for them is clear.

Our nation cannot succeed economically unless we do this. We cannot afford the cost of *not* doing right by them. For example, the economic cost of losing just one 14-year-old to a life of crime is over \$3 million (“New Evidence on the Monetary Value of Saving a High Risk Youth,” Mark A. Cohen and Alex R. Piquero, *Journal of Quantitative Criminology*, 2009). How much better, safer, more economically responsible to spend just \$1,000 to make sure this young person has an advocate for her best interests? Someone who will stand up for her well-being, with no loyalties other than to her best interests, and who will refuse to give up until justice has been done.

I am always struck by those statues of justice you see high up on our courthouses; the blindfolded woman holding the scales of justice suggests it is something impartial and remote. If you only follow the rules correctly, justice will be done.

That's not the kind of justice I am thinking about. Court decision making about children's lives is full of considerations having less to do with procedure and more to do with the human side of carrying out justice. That is the idea of justice that is so essential to the success of CASA/guardian ad litem work. When we talk about advocating for the child's best interests, we are talking about giving these youth an opportunity for the things they most want: a happy, productive life; a life of value; a world that allows you to believe in justice.

The juvenile and family court judges I have known over the years are some of the most compassionate proponents of justice for children that I have ever known. When he served on our board and executive committee, the late Judge Steven Herrell of Oregon was a constant, thoughtful and gentle reminder of why we do what we do: to do right by abused and neglected children. Judge William Thorne of the Utah Court of Appeals, who also served on the National CASA Board of Trustees, is a passionate proponent of the rights of American Indian and Alaska Native children.

When I became the CEO of National CASA, Judge Michael S. Town of Hawaii sent me an article about therapeutic justice, an idea that was getting a lot of attention. In “problem-solving” courts such as drug courts and unified family courts, there was a focus on holistic approaches and collaboration between the legal community and external parties in order to achieve positive outcomes for everyone involved.

As independent advocates for our children's best interests, CASA and guardian ad litem volunteers are also engaging in the most constructive mission of the 21<sup>st</sup> century: to build a fairer, more inclusive, more just society. When we bring justice to those who have been abused and neglected, our lives and our country are enriched in more ways than one. 🏡

# THE Connection

News and Information from the National Court Appointed Special Advocate Association



A publication of the National CASA Association, representing 1,055 program offices and 70,919 CASA volunteers serving 237,095 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. They give children a chance to grow up in safe, permanent homes.

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 Phone (206) 270-0072 or (800) 628-3233  
 Email: [theconnection@nationalcasa.org](mailto:theconnection@nationalcasa.org)  
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The Connection  
 National CASA Association  
 100 W. Harrison  
 North Tower, Suite 500  
 Seattle, WA 98119  
 Email: [theconnection@nationalcasa.org](mailto:theconnection@nationalcasa.org)

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# Education Became My Compass to the Future and My Key to Permanence

Ashley Jackson  
2010 FosterClub All-Star



*Permanence is a word that means different things to different people. I have been able to establish connections with peers that I know are lifelong bonds. Knowing that I have a tight group of people who are willing to help me through struggles, give me advice and be there for me when I really need it means the world to me.*

Today, more than 420,000 children in the US foster care system struggle with issues including sibling separation, permanency, education and reunification. I was once one of these statistics—a young person who spent five years in foster care, uncertain of what my future would hold. I was one of hundreds of thousands of youth trying to navigate my way through a complex system. As if being 16 isn't a difficult enough time in a youth's life, adding foster care to the list of obstacles didn't make things any easier.

## Finding a Compass

When I entered the system in my teens, I lived with my aunt and uncle in kinship care. Living with these people was totally new to me; I had to learn how to live in a new house, work part time at a new location and adjust to a new lifestyle. I felt a great deal of anxiety and uncertainty.

It became clear to me that I needed a compass—something I could use to guide me to a future that would be under *my* control. The compass I found was education. For any negative situation in life I was experiencing, I would channel all my energies into my schoolwork and extracurricular activities.

Education was something that I was in control of. I knew that through hard work and dedication, education would be my ticket. Growing up in a family in which a small percentage graduated high school—let alone went on to higher education—I decided early on in life that I didn't want this for myself. Education was my escape from the cycle and my chance at breaking the trend. What served as my distraction before entering foster care became even more of an ambition and primary focus once in care.

## What I Had Going for Me

Since leaving foster care, I've learned that I had an advantage over many other young people in care in that I had supportive adults who enabled me to participate fully in extracurricular activities. Throughout the remainder of high school and my time living with my aunt and uncle, I took time to explore and learn so many things through extracurricular activities. I was sure that when I had play practice, student council meetings or a Future Business Leaders of America conference I would be able to attend. My education was in my hands, and my family now served as a support system.

Another key advantage was the ability to stay in the same school. Before entering care and moving 40 minutes away, I was not sure I would be allowed to stay in the district I had attended since kindergarten. However, through the support of my caseworker, juvenile officer and attorney, I was able to advocate effectively for a court order from the judge allowing me to stay. Not having the disruption of switching schools provided me with stability when I entered care.

Participation in extracurricular activities helped shape me into the person I am today. These activities taught me responsibility and led me to independence. They also allowed me to discover my strengths and develop skills that would translate into educational and career interests. If there is one piece of advice I could give to CASA volunteers, it would be to encourage and advocate for foster youth to be given a chance to become involved at school and pursue their interests.

Over the past three years, education has enabled me to plot a route through another obstacle common among foster youth: a lack of permanency. After graduating high school and making the transition to college, I lost what I thought was a permanent connection with my aunt. *Permanence* is a word that means different things to different people and, for me, one that has changed its meaning over

[continued on page 7]

# Celebrating *Fostering Connections* While Envisioning More for Youth

Rep. Jim McDermott, D-WA

Two years ago, Congress enacted sweeping legislation that made major improvements to the nation's child welfare system. *The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act* allows states to provide financial support to grandparents and other relatives who care for children in foster care, and it makes states much more accountable in meeting the health and education needs of children under their supervision. The new law also supports states in extending foster care to age 21, giving older youth critical resources to make a successful transition into adulthood.

*Fostering Connections* is a major accomplishment, and as the chairman of the subcommittee that oversees child welfare programs, I am proud to have guided it to passage. Additional reforms to the child welfare system are still needed, and I am eager to work with my colleagues on Capitol Hill to move such legislation forward. However, I fear that providing the necessary resources to child welfare and safety-net programs is now in serious jeopardy due to a slow economic recovery and high unemployment. The need for government aid remains high; cuts in services will harm at-risk children and families, particularly youth aging out of foster care.

One example of the need for additional funding was recently highlighted in a *New York Times* article reporting the dramatic decline in public housing units across the country as housing agencies shutter units due to lack of funds. This lack of affordable

housing affects a substantial number of youth who age out of foster care. Additionally, calls to repeal the new *Affordable Care Act* threaten the health and welfare of older youth who, under the new law, could get additional help paying for doctor visits, medical exams and prescription medication. With the stakes this high, we cannot afford to move backward on funding levels.

Reductions in spending on social service programs not only move the county in the wrong direction, they undermine the spirit of the *Fostering Connections* legislation, which was designed to extend sorely needed government-funded services to older youth transitioning into adulthood. It is not, nor was it intended to be, the silver bullet that solves all problems facing children in the child welfare system, but it is a significant step forward in addressing shortcomings within the foster care system.

We must maintain and continue to improve upon our country's safety-net programs to respond to the needs of youth and families struggling to make ends meet. At the same time, we must continue to assist the children and families who come to the attention of the child welfare system.

CASA volunteers play a vital role in helping our most vulnerable children achieve the best outcomes possible. They are charged with advocating on behalf of abused and neglected children in the legal and social service systems to ensure they get everything they need and deserve. I am proud that the movement which began in Seattle in



1977 has now grown to include more than 70,000 volunteers nationwide who helped 237,000 children last year. Their service will be critical in the future as we work towards strengthening the foster care system.

As I reflect on what was accomplished in the *Fostering Connections* legislation, I cannot help but think of the unnecessary barriers our older youth continue to face as they try to make it on their own in the worst economic climate since the Great Depression. *Fostering Connections'* additional services provide a crucial extra measure of support to these youth, but it is still not enough.

It is time for all of my colleagues in Congress to commit to supporting the health and welfare of our most vulnerable youth—those who do not have the benefits of a traditional family network upon which to rely. The federal government must do more to ensure that children in foster care are not only supported and nurtured while in care but are given the necessary tools to achieve their true potential as they transition into adulthood.

I will continue to work to strengthen the child welfare system by not only preserving the progress we've made, but by expanding the critical services needed by America's most vulnerable children and families. Our children deserve nothing less. 🚩

# 5 Ways to Better Serve Older Youth

Ryan Miller, Team Leader  
Transitioning Youth Project  
CASA of Travis County  
Austin, TX

Thousands of youth age out of foster care every year. They are at greater risk of homelessness, incarceration and poverty. They are often woefully underprepared for the independence they are given after they reach adulthood. How can CASA volunteers better serve these youth?

The *Transitioning Youth Project* of CASA of Travis County was created to better meet the needs of youth at risk of aging out without a permanent family. Through our work, we have learned a few techniques that help us connect with youth and ultimately better represent their interests. Here are five points to consider while working with teenagers in care.

## 1. Seek Opportunities for Growth Through Decision Making.

The system is set up so that the teens we represent have minimal decision-making power. From the big questions to the small, professionals and foster parents are often calling the shots. Where does that leave an 18-year-old who is on his own for the first time?

Being able to make healthy decisions is a learned skill. Youth need the chance to cook their own dinners, even at the cost of burning their thumbs on the stove. Or the chance to manage their own money, even if they mispend some of it. Making poor decisions is a part of growing up, and we are only delaying that process by trying to keep foster youth in a bubble until their 18<sup>th</sup> birthdays.

## 2. Don't Be a Disciplinarian. Youth Don't Need Any More of Those.

Foster youth usually have plenty of people to tell them how they have messed up. Their placement, their school, their judge, their caseworker and possibly others are going to chime in after a poor decision. Even if the CASA volunteer is the person the youth most trusts, the youth does not need to hear from one more person how they blew it. Instead, be future-focused and ask, "Where do we go from here?" or "How do we get past this?"

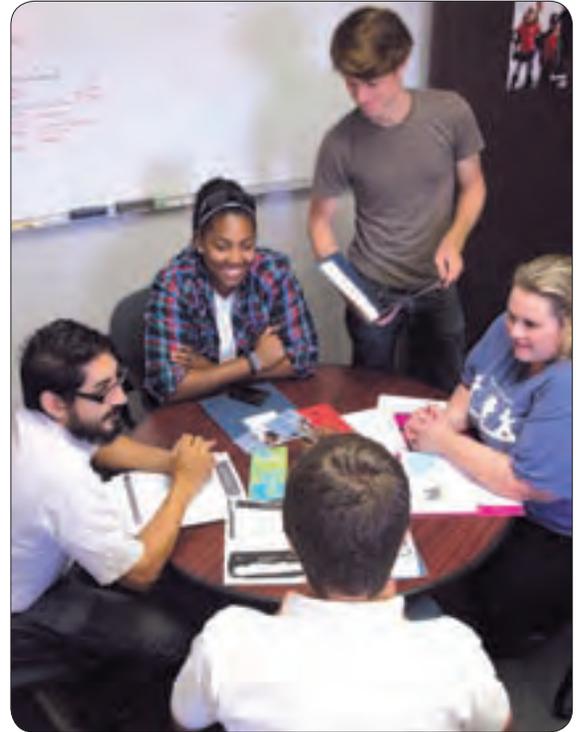
## 3. Give Youth a Voice.

Countless foster care alumni have stated that they felt as though they never had a voice. CASA volunteers can change that. Make sure that youth are participants in meetings concerning their case and are able to speak to judges at hearings. Keep them informed about what is going on. In Travis County, youth have begun to write their own court reports in which they share with the judge their plan, concerns and wishes.

## 4. Find Connections for Youth.

Youth need healthy adults in their lives. The idea of preparing youth for "independent" living is a fallacy. Successful young adults are almost always dependent on those around them for support. No one can do it alone.

So reconsider family. Even if the biological parents were not healthy



Transitioning Youth Team Leader Ryan Miller (standing) with (from left) Transitioning Youth Specialists Erik Lugo, Charron Sumler and Melanie Ann Watson

years ago, things may have changed. A great majority of foster care alumni seek out biological parents after leaving care. Volunteer advocates can help make this connection while the youth is in care and still has support available. Also, CASA volunteers can find healthy connections from the community—teachers, coaches, foster parents or even parents of friends. Use FosterClub's Permanency Pact toolkit described at [CASAforChildren.org/Adulthood](http://CASAforChildren.org/Adulthood) to assist in defining these relationships.

## 5. Expect Snags Along the Way, But Don't Let the Snags Distract.

Emergencies are going to come up. We are working with teenagers who have been through a lot. Ups and downs are to be expected. However, it is the CASA volunteer's role to remain future-focused. While facing the daily strains of being in care, a youth needs someone able to step back and look at the big picture. CASA volunteers can be the voice that speaks up for a youth's goals of higher education, future employment and lifelong relationships. 🏠

# Transition from Foster Care: 7 Myths

Celeste Bodner  
 Founder and Director  
 FosterClub

It's no secret. You've seen the shocking statistics about youth who age out of the system: the low high school graduation rates, the elevated incidences of teen pregnancy and incarceration as well as the homelessness suffered by youth who have recently been dismissed from foster care.

It's somewhat of a relief that the new federal *Fostering Connections* law has made major improvements to programs for older youth in care. This legislation mandates important new services. But to ensure that we meet the needs of older youth, we must face persistent myths:

## Myth 1: It takes 90 days to put a transition plan in place.

The *Fostering Connections Act* goes a long way by requiring states, during the 90-day period immediately prior to a youth aging out of care, to "provide the child with assistance and support in developing a transition plan that is personalized at the direction of the child, includes specific options on housing, health insurance, education, local opportunities for mentors, and workforce supports and employment services."

But three months to plan before a youth leaves foster care for good? This isn't sufficient time to implement a transition plan, particularly considering the setbacks and challenges many foster youth have faced throughout their teen years. Perhaps we should be thinking about three years instead of three months. FosterClub is excited that this is exactly the approach National CASA has taken through its new *Fostering Futures* curriculum.

## Myth 2: Young people leave foster care.

The truth is, the foster care system leaves the youths' lives. Not the other way around. Once the age of emancipation is reached, support from the system generally falls away completely: shelter, food, transportation, mental health support, mentoring, a place to do laundry. Once we recognize this, we realize the imperative to install supports that *will* last into adulthood.

## Myth 3: It's a transition.

For many youth, leaving foster care is less about a "transition" and more about a week's—or maybe a month's—notice that they'll need to pack their things. Ready or not. Perhaps more like "cliffhanging" than "transitioning." Although some states allow youth to reenter foster care, it's only allowed up until the age of emancipation—usually either



The author, center, with members of the FosterClub All-Stars. Visit [fosterclub.com](http://fosterclub.com) to find a wealth of resources for youth in care.

18 or 21. And the only way it can happen is if young people know they can come back.

These days, transitioning from the average family home can take many years. Most young adults in America lean on their parents well into their 20s and sometimes beyond. Parents may be there for their children for many years past the onset of young adulthood.

## Myth 4: Independent living is what we strive for.

Some child welfare systems state "independent living" as a goal for youth leaving the foster care system.

At FosterClub, we differ. According to our young people, having committed and reliable adult supporters is the number-one indicator of success for a young person transitioning from foster care. *Interdependent living* is better term to describe what a young person should aim for.

## Myth 5: The solution is simple—permanence.

While establishing permanence in a youth's life has been given priority status within the child welfare field, FosterClub finds that young people who have experienced a lot of disruption during their years in care often don't know what *permanence* means, let alone how important it is. For example:

*It wasn't until I became an intern for FosterClub that I began to truly understand what permanency meant. I thought that since I had "successfully" exited the foster care system I had permanency. Now I understand permanence doesn't have to be within the constraints of reunification, adoption, placement with a family member or another permanent living arrangement. Instead, for me it signifies a lifelong connection with a supportive adult, and I know what I need to do to reach towards that.*

—Janessa, Iowa

## Myth 6: Independent living skills = “I’m all set.”

Many young people are understandably eager to leave the system behind. They dutifully participated in training for independent living. They’ve learned to fill out an apartment rental application, balance their checkbook and do laundry without turning everything pink. They feel ready for life on their own.

But everything can change in a second. A recent blog post by FosterClub 2010 All-Star Ashley Jackson (the author of this issue’s Alum Editorial) illustrates how the situation of a young person, by all counts “successful,” can change with no warning:

*Saturday began as a typical day. I woke up, went to work.... I got off work, packed my bag, filled up my tank and hit the highway. I was expecting a normal weekend—visiting family and friends and taking a break from my hectic lifestyle. Those thoughts quickly faded when I swerved to miss a deer on the highway and experienced a motor vehicle accident.*

*After a lengthy time and undergoing testing, the doctor informed me that I had fractured my back and would have to be sent to a specialist that night for further testing. I spent two days in the hospital, was put in a back brace and was told not to return to school or work for two weeks. In the blink of an eye my entire life changed. How was I going to manage all of this?*

—Ashley, Michigan

It’s great to have a good transition plan—even better to have independent living skills. But that’s not enough. Fortunately, Ashley had taken the time to develop contacts and supports for life after foster care. They were her safety net in this emergency.

## Myth 7: It’s up to us to protect them.

This is actually partly true. Sure, as supportive adults in a young person’s life, we need to protect them from harm. But teens often complain about missing out on normal milestones because activities are deemed too risky for foster youth: getting a driver’s

license, staying overnight with a friend, taking an out-of-state vacation with a friend’s family—or even dating.

If we are asking young people in care to make responsible life decisions when they leave the system, we need to provide occasions that allow them to practice. Strategic scenarios should be offered that allow youth to take risks. Yes, there will be mistakes and failures. But what better way to learn than from experience? What better time to practice decision making than while foster care provides a safety net?

## Let’s move past the seven myths.

As Ashley’s and Janessa’s quotes illustrate, the greatest gift we can offer young people who will be leaving care is the support of committed adults. A CASA volunteer is in an excellent position to help youth arrange and strengthen these relationships. Young leaders from FosterClub overwhelmingly recite that the difference between success and becoming one of the statistics is the care and love of one or more supportive adults. 🗨️

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[Alum Editorial continued from page 3]

time. However, I’ve finally found what I have been searching for. Through college, I have been able to establish connections with peers that I know are lifelong bonds.

Knowing that I have a tight group of people who are willing to help me through struggles, give me advice and be there for me when I really need it means the world to me. This has become my permanence, and without higher education I do not know that I would have found it. Now that I finally have this, my advice to other youth would be to determine how they would like to define permanence and create a plan to make it happen.

As a CASA volunteer, you can help young people explore what permanence

means to them and take steps to establish it. You can assist them in making connections to supportive adults and peers that will get them through their transition to adulthood and carry them through life.

## A Future with Promise

Today, I am a senior at Missouri State University and will be graduating in May with a degree in public relations. My foster care experience has helped carry me to where I am today. I am hopeful and confident about my future. My experiences—including the situations I lived through while in my mother’s care, the challenges I overcame while in kinship care and most of all my pursuit of education—

have contributed to my character today. I have a drive to succeed in life, and I have faith that will happen. Education has served as a guiding force through foster care and my continuing transition to adulthood. It has kept me from becoming just another statistic.

*After five years in kinship care, Ashley is now living independently with roommates while attending university. She aspires to a career in nonprofit event planning and fundraising. Ashley’s dream is to find an occupation where she can have an impact on the lives of others and serve as an inspiration. Learn about her contributions as a 2010 All-Star at FosterClub.com. 🗨️*

# Supporting Youth Transitioning to Adulthood

Gary Stangler  
Executive Director  
Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative



**B**y many measures, Ebony Dycus, 19, is soaring. She aged out of foster care several months ago after more than six years in 11 different foster homes. Today, she is a freshman accounting major at Indiana State University and has been the secretary of the youth board at Connected by 25, the site for the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative project in Indianapolis. Dycus also teaches other youth in foster care about money matters and is saving for her future through our *Opportunity Passport*™.

Dycus makes it all look easy, but she would tell you that a big reason for her success has been Chris Mundy, her Court-Appointed Special Advocate, who has been at her side every step of the way.

“He has had great input and great opinions,” said Dycus. “Sometimes, it feels like you are there by yourself when you don’t have any parents. But your CASA is there for you. It has made everything easier. He really picked my brain about what I would be doing after I emancipated and helped me set goals.”

Mundy, who works with Child Advocates, Inc. in Indianapolis, is modest about his efforts: “Ebony is really self-driven. I felt like my role was to try to have her in a position in which she would have support in place after she aged out. I tried to get her to think a little bigger about her life and where she was headed.”

## A Growing Population Needing Support

Once an invisible population, older youth aging out of foster care have received much more national attention over the past decade. As a result, many nonprofit organizations are making this group a priority and offering an array of resources to help them. These include National CASA’s new *Fostering Futures* curriculum and our Initiative’s *Opportunity Passport*, which offers financial literacy training and a matched savings account to purchase approved assets. The *Opportunity Passport* is part of Jim Casey’s five key strategies, which are youth engagement; increased opportunities; partnerships and resources; research and communications; and public will and policy.

State and federal policymakers have also implemented a raft of new laws and policies to improve outcomes, such

as a provision addressing the needs of youth aging out of foster care in the sweeping health care reform law passed by Congress last year.

Over the past decade, the number of youth aging out of foster care has increased dramatically from 19,000 in 1999 to nearly 30,000 in 2008. While these numbers sound large, they are far from insurmountable. Foundations, organizations and policymakers who want to make a difference have it within their power to prevent the poor outcomes for these young people that cost society dearly.

When I think back to my years as director of Missouri’s Department of Social Services, I know the child welfare field has come a long way in recognizing the needs of older youth in care and in providing supports for them. But I also know much more remains to be done because too many of these youth are still unable to complete their educations, find housing and jobs or get medical care; they still lack the supports that families typically provide. A study released last year by Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago and Partners for Our Children at the University of Washington detailed the dismal outcomes:

- By age 24, only 6% of young people who left foster care had completed two- or four-year college degrees.
- Fewer than half were working.
- Nearly 40% had been homeless or “couch-surfed” since leaving foster care.
- Three quarters of the young women were receiving public assistance.
- Nearly 60% of the young men had been convicted of a crime at some point in their young lives.

As Mark Courtney, the study’s principal author, notes: “These are young people who were placed in the care of the state, not because they were committing crimes but because they had been abused or neglected. We were dismayed to find that almost a fifth of young people need significant help, perhaps for many years, after leaving foster care.”

The alarming bottom line is that a decade after Congress passed the *John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Act of 1999*, many of these young people simply are not being

connected to supportive families and do not have the resources we provide to our own children.

The *Chafee Act* did significantly improve the Independent Living Program by doubling federal funding to \$140 million so states could provide youth in foster care with training to obtain employment or prepare for postsecondary education, learn daily living skills, prevent substance abuse and maintain good health. The law provided states with federal vouchers for postsecondary education and the option to extend Medicaid to age 21.

The problem is that \$140 million—an amount that has not increased in 11 years—isn't enough for all emancipating youth, especially as this population has grown so significantly. In fact, most estimates indicate that fewer than half of

eligible youth get any kind of assistance from *Chafee*. As a result, states find themselves patching together additional educational, mental health and job training services, but these often are not well coordinated, leaving young people to navigate multiple bureaucracies on their own.

### Landmark Legislation in 2008

To fill the gaps, Congress passed sweeping legislation in 2008 called the *Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act*, which offers partial federal reimbursement to states if they opt to allow youth to remain in care past age 18. The law also places new requirements on states, including notifying relatives about the possibility of kinship care, placing siblings together in care and requiring state agencies to create individualized

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## Fostering Futures and Possible Selves

As a doctoral student in Ann Arbor, a young researcher learned about Devil's Night, in which young Detroiters burn abandoned buildings on Halloween.

"I wondered: What are these kids thinking is possible for them in the future," said Daphna Oyserman, now a University of Michigan professor with joint appointments in the Department of Psychology and the School of Social Work. "I thought, surely they aren't thinking that burning down buildings would turn into obstacles for attaining their futures. I wondered what they imagined was possible for themselves in the future."

National CASA's new *Fostering Futures* curriculum is rooted in the studies of Oyserman and another researcher, Michael Hock, associate director of the University of Kansas School of Education.

Oyserman's research has focused on a concept called "possible selves." Her studies have helped young people achieve their full potential by having them visualize a positive self-identity to work toward and a negative one to avoid as well as set goals for the future and plan to achieve those goals.

So she posed questions to youth who had been in trouble as well as students at area high schools. She asked them what they imagined was possible both in terms of positive selves they wanted to become and negative selves they wanted to avoid. Interestingly, she found young people's answers did not differ much when they projected far enough into the future.

"All of these teens talked about getting married, having a house, having money, realizing the American Dream," Oyserman said. "Where I *did* see differences was what they saw for themselves in the more immediate future."

From her interviews, Oyserman coined the term *balanced possible selves* to describe those teens interested in doing well

who were *also* concerned about doing badly. In one study, she asked what youth were doing to become like that positive self or to avoid becoming like that negative self.

"Just having *one strategy* was a powerful predictor of behavior change," Oyserman said. She translated her research into an intervention called *School-to-Jobs*, demonstrating that brief, group-based exercises changed children's possible selves, making feared selves more salient and linked to strategies. The result was that children improved their academic performance.

In the *Fostering Futures* curriculum, CASA volunteers and youth work together to examine the following:

- What is the youth good at? What do *others* say the youth is good at?
- What does the youth *like* to do?
- Where does he see himself in one year? In five years?
- What are some of the youth's hopes, fears and expectations of herself?
- What are some short-, medium- and long-term goals the youth thinks can lead to a brighter future? What does the youth need to do to get there?
- How will the youth know she is successful at these goals? How will she know a change of course is necessary?

Tiffany Denson, transitioning youth director at Child Advocates San Antonio, Inc., is a believer in the possible selves research.

"When you look at these youth, traditionally every decision is made *for* them," Denson said. "You will come into foster care. You will live in this home. You will go to this school. No one ever stops to say, 'What are your thoughts?' I believe that people don't want to fail, and I'm a huge advocate of getting the youth to engage in their own lives."

transition plans 90 days before youth leave foster care.

But after the law passed, the economy tanked, and states have been slow to implement *Fostering Connections* due to tight budgets. States also need good ideas for sound policy and practice to implement some of the new provisions, such as the requirement that young people be in charge of their own transition plans. Jim Casey's successful experience with engaging youth offers some lessons in that regard.

Both major federal laws—*Chafee* and *Fostering Connections*—go a long way toward helping older youth in foster care. But they also fall short in important ways. Neither law emphasizes economic self-sufficiency or the importance of lifelong relationships with caring adults.

The National Youth Transition Database is another new development that has great potential but is rife with challenges. The *Chafee Act* requires states, as of last October, to collect and report both demographic and outcome data on youth transitioning from foster care. The first batch of data is due this May. States are to begin with a baseline survey of youth at age 17 and then track them after they leave the system at ages 19 and 21. States are supposed to report on their services and supports for older youth as well as on outcomes, including financial self-sufficiency, experience with homelessness and educational attainment. Not surprisingly, the challenges of data collection are immense. Because the penalties for noncompliance are nominal, I am concerned that states will risk the penalties rather than track down youth who have left care. What worries me is that without this data, we have no true measure of how our funding, policies and practices are affecting outcomes for these youth.

### **A Call to Action by the Senate Caucus on Foster Youth**

In 2009, US Senators Chuck Grassley, R-IA, and Mary Landrieu, D-LA, created the Senate Caucus on Foster Youth, which sponsored working sessions to frame options for child welfare reform. The caucus did an outstanding job of engaging youth in these sessions, including several young people from Jim Casey sites. The caucus recently issued a call to action (see [bit.ly/CalltoAct](http://bit.ly/CalltoAct)) addressing issues such as group homes, congregate care, an over-reliance on psychotropic medications, sibling connection, youth engagement, mentoring, pregnant and parenting teens,



"Jo has completely changed my attitude about life," says Brittany about her volunteer advocate, Jo Lopez. "She's motivated me to strive for what I want in life." Jo volunteers with the Spartanburg County GAL Program (SC).

family preservation activities and child welfare financing.

"The US foster care system is broken in many places, and it must be fixed," said Sen. Landrieu. "State and federal governments combined are spending in excess of \$25 billion on the foster care system each year, but the results are not something we can be proud of. Recruiting loving and skilled foster parents, requiring funding streams to follow the child, securing a mentor for every young person aging out of the system and strengthening programs like CASA are just a few important steps Congress is focused on."

Sen. Grassley added: "One of the goals of the Caucus on Foster Youth is to hear directly from the youth in foster care about the policies that affect them. They're telling us that some key

improvements have been very helpful, but there are still gaps in services and persistent problems that a combination of policy changes and citizen involvement can ease."

### **New Services for Older Youth in Development**

In addition to policymakers making older youth a priority, I'm especially pleased that major national organizations and funders, such as National CASA, are recognizing the tremendous challenges facing older youth and are providing services for them. Thanks to generous support from the Walmart Foundation, National CASA is piloting its new *Fostering Futures* program in 16 sites nationwide and is making a real difference. In *Fostering Futures*, CASA volunteers advocate for and advise foster youth ages 14–21 as well as help them identify supportive adult connections and develop specific transition plans. Based on the "possible selves" research of University of Michigan professor Daphna Oyserman and University of Kansas professor Michael Hock (see sidebar on previous page), *Fostering Futures* provides CASA volunteers with extra training to build a rapport with older youth and to conduct a needs assessment so they can better advocate for young people.

"This new curriculum gives CASA volunteers more structure to ask questions they might not have asked older youth about their needs, such as housing, school and their relationships with their birth families," said Brian Washburn, National CASA training director. "And it offers research-based tools to help young people envision what their futures could become and how to get there."

Tiffany Denson, transitioning youth director at Child Advocates San Antonio, Inc., reports that *Fostering Futures* already has helped immensely. She recalled a youth who

struggled with writing during a *Fostering Futures* exercise. As the CASA volunteer observed the youth, it became obvious that the young man was nearly illiterate despite having been promoted through the school system and even earning an A in his high school English class.

“It was painfully clear that this 17-year-old couldn’t write basic words, but no one had paid attention to him,” Denson said. “That one experience of a CASA volunteer sitting with the youth and going through the *Fostering Futures* assessment identified a major need and a roadmap for advocacy. This advocate will press the school for testing. Once a clearer picture emerges, we can advocate for specific services for this young person. This tool opened a door.”

### Findings of the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative

At the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, we have learned a lot about how this population can be served most effectively. The Initiative is focused solely on helping states and communities assist older youth in foster care in making successful transitions to adulthood. We are learning that we must actively focus on all five strategies mentioned above in order for progress to be achieved. We know that not only do these strategies help youth, but they also pay off financially: Our 11 sites nationwide generate a \$6.50 return for every dollar invested, according to a recent study (see [bit.ly/JCYOI\\_Study](http://bit.ly/JCYOI_Study)).

We have found that engaging youth is an extremely effective strategy—both in terms of planning for their own transitions from foster care and for improving the public systems that affect youth in care. I’m proud that former *Opportunity Passport* participant Dianna Walters is scheduled to lead a track of powerful workshops on youth engagement at National CASA’s 2011 annual conference. Walters aged out without a family after nine years in foster care, joined the Youth Leadership Advisory Team in Maine at 16 and has advocated passionately for youth in care. She is pursuing a master’s degree in public policy and management. An important focus of her research has been best practices in transition planning, which will help states trying to implement *Fostering Connections*.

Each Jim Casey site has a youth leadership board in which young people are empowered to become better advocates for improving the public systems that affect them. Youth have advocated

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## Resources to Support Older Youth

In addition to the following highlighted resources, you can find a robust, up-to-date list of organizations, publications and tools related to supporting older youth in care at [CASAforChildren.org/Adulthood](http://CASAforChildren.org/Adulthood).

### Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative

Founded in 2001, the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative is focused on helping states and communities assist older youth in foster care in making successful transitions to adulthood. The Initiative connects youth to the people and resources they need for permanence, education, employment, housing and healthcare as well as supportive community and personal relationships. Initiative sites across the country offer the *Opportunity Passport™*, training young people in money matters. The Initiative matches their savings up to \$1,000 to buy assets that build future economic success, such as tuition, housing deposits, medical expenses or business start-up costs. For more information, visit [JimCaseYouth.org](http://JimCaseYouth.org).

### National CASA and *Fostering Futures*

*Fostering Futures* is a curriculum National CASA is piloting in 16 sites nationally (see previous sidebar). Details about this comprehensive training curriculum for CASA volunteers can be found at [bit.ly/9PP20d](http://bit.ly/9PP20d). A web-based *Fostering Futures* Pilot Site Community allows advocates to benefit from others’ experiences by asking questions, sharing resources and discussing effective strategies in implementing the program. Visit [CASAforChildren.org/Adulthood](http://CASAforChildren.org/Adulthood) for a wealth of resources for youth and the adults supporting them through their transition to independence.

### Fostering Connections Resource Center

President Bush signed the federal *Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act* into law in 2008. The Fostering Connections Resource Center was founded to assist states and tribes in implementing the law properly. The Resource Center offers non-partisan data on all aspects of the law, individualized technical assistance and opportunities to connect with or ask questions of experts, stakeholders and peers. For more information, visit [FosteringConnections.org](http://FosteringConnections.org).

### Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago

This independent policy research center’s mission is to build knowledge that improves policies and programs for children and youth, families and their communities. It is a key partner in the Midwest Evaluation of Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth. In this study, researchers interviewed 732 youth in foster care ages 17–18 from Illinois, Wisconsin and Iowa. The young people were interviewed again at 19, 21 and 24. The sequential interviews allowed researchers to determine how the young people fared over time as well as to contrast the problems of youth who had the option of remaining in foster care until age 21 with those who did not. For more information, visit [bit.ly/Chap\\_Hall](http://bit.ly/Chap_Hall).

# How a CASA Volunteer and the Jim Casey Initiative Helped Me Grow Up

Nadia Draper

I want to tell you about a special woman, Suzanne Kolesik. She has done so much for me, it is hard to find a place to start.

The first time I met Sue was at my foster family's house. The reason I liked her was because she said: "I am here for the kids, and if that means I have to get someone upset, so be it." I could tell that Sue actually cared about all the kids she volunteered for at the Sarpy County CASA program near Omaha.

As my 19th birthday drew near, we knew that I would age out of the system. Aging out would mean the loss of essential life services that had been place while I was in foster care. Our plan was to obtain student loans so I could go to college. The plan was halted by the discovery that I was not a naturalized citizen. Sue asked for and received help from my caseworker; my guardian ad litem attorney, who helps us with legal issues; a PALS (Preparation for Adult Living Services) representative; state and local CASA staff; Legal Aid and many others.

We finally learned that our problems could be solved if we had a naturalization certificate or a US passport. My adoptive parents, who had abused me, would not relinquish my passport. Knowing I would age out in a few weeks and that the process for obtaining a new passport could take a few months, we broadened our search for solutions to include more contacts with Health and Human Services, brainstorming about other options with CASA representatives and communicating with Nebraska's elected political leaders. Finally, my adoptive mother turned over the passport. Sue and I finalized the requirements for me to begin the next stage of my life. With one day to spare, I was prepared to age out of the system.

Then I was in a relationship for over a year with a boy who ended up mistreating me. All of my friends gave up on helping me break up with him, but Sue never gave up on me. Sue kept calling me and worrying about me. I just kept ignoring her phone calls. She talked to my youth pastor and told him I wasn't answering my phone and she was worried. My pastor came to my boyfriend's house, saw how I looked and said he would either call the cops or I had to leave with him. I packed my things and left.

After this big change, things were tough for me. I had no home, friends or family or anything like that. But Sue was there for me. All I had to do is continue going to college and



not go back to my ex. She helped me out with my homework until I got it, even if it was past midnight. She taught me how to organize my mail. With all her help, I slowly began to understand and do what grownups do. I wouldn't have gotten this far without her.

Another group that was helpful as I established independence was the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative. With my *Opportunity Passport*<sup>™</sup>, I have purchased a car and am saving to buy a house someday.

I continue doing things on my own, but I always have Sue's help when I need it. I talk to her almost every day. She continues saying meaningful words to keep me looking forward to the better future she knows I will have. She keeps letting me know how important I am.

Sue is just a CASA, like anyone else who works with kids. She didn't have to come visit me weekly, call me every day, do all the things she did—because it wasn't her job. She did it out of the goodness of her heart. The world needs more people like Sue. She is a loving mother and wife. Along with taking care of her CASA kids, she takes care of her whole family too. She makes a difference in the world.

*Nadia, 20, attends Metropolitan Community College full time and works part time at a daycare center. She is interested in a career where she can use her native language of Russian. She participates in the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative site Project Everlast Omaha sponsored by the Nebraska Children and Families Foundation. Nadia also benefits from the Opportunity Passport, the Initiative's tool to help youth aging out of care build economic self-sufficiency.*



for significant changes in the way public systems serve young people aging out of care by meeting with federal and state lawmakers. For instance, seven of our states have extended Medicaid coverage for youth formerly in foster care from age 18 to 21, providing three additional

years of health care coverage. Four of our states successfully worked to get tuition waived and other educational supports expanded, giving youth a better chance of getting a post-secondary education. Our youth boards in Maine and Iowa led successful efforts to get state laws passed that give siblings in different foster care placements the right to visit each other.

Through our *Opportunity Passport*<sup>™</sup>, young people are trained in money matters, such as budgeting, balancing a checkbook and using credit wisely. All participants have bank accounts, and savings are matched up to \$1,000 to buy assets that build future economic success, such as tuition, housing deposits, cars to get to work and school, medical expenses or business start-up costs. Initially, many people were skeptical about whether young people in foster care could actually save money. But over the past five years, more than 3,600 young people have taken our financial literacy training and participated in our *Opportunity Passport*. Collectively, they have saved nearly \$4 million and made more than 2,500 asset purchases, drawing matching funds. Interestingly, we are finding that the most successful savers are young people with the greatest challenges—those who are parents or who have been homeless.

Danielle Brunetta of San Diego is one of these youth. Several years ago, she was pregnant with her second child and struggling to maintain a part-time job because she lacked reliable transportation to work. “Every day was a struggle trying to figure it all out,” she said.

Brunetta became an *Opportunity Passport* participant and youth board member. She not only saved money but also received training on shopping for cars. After a year, Brunetta received a \$1,000 match for the \$1,000 she had saved and was able to put the \$2,000 down on a van. The van enabled her to work full time and go to school at night.

“With the help of the *Opportunity Passport*, I was able to purchase a car, use my time more effectively and tackle more tasks throughout the day,” she said. “I’ve maintained full-time employment, continued a college education, and I can still be home in time to read bedtime stories to my sons.”

### New Legislation and Other Hopeful Signs

I’m hopeful about a new bill—the *Foster Youth Financial Security Act of 2010*—recently introduced in the US House of Representatives that mirrors Jim Casey’s *Opportunity Passport*. Among other things, the bill would require states to establish and manage Individual Development Accounts for each child in foster care who is at least 14 years old, with funds available to cover housing, education and employment expenses. The measure would also require states to provide financial education to all youth in care.

Beyond this strategy for financial self-sufficiency, I’d also like policymakers to mandate that all young people leaving foster care be discharged to a family, legal guardian, adoptive parent or a permanently committed, caring adult. I’d like to see federal and state laws and policies that say when youth leave foster care, they must have somewhere to go.

Over my many years working with older youth, I’ve seen two traits over and over: Young people in transition display remarkable resiliency as well as a powerful drive for family that I believe is hard-wired in all of us.

### Conclusion

In Indianapolis, Chris Mundy doesn’t pretend to be a substitute for Ebony Dycus’s parent. But as her guardian ad litem and a committed caring adult in her life, Mundy made an important difference. Dycus said that while she was still in care, Mundy helped her communicate with her foster family and called her high school when things were rocky.

“I would go to the school and talk to the social workers if I thought the school should have done something that hadn’t taken place,” says Mundy. “She didn’t have a parent who could go to the school and stay on top of things.”

They also discussed the issues that Dycus would face in college, such as grades and transportation. Mundy tried, for example, to get her to think about where she would go during school breaks. “She wouldn’t be like other kids and have a place to go,” he said. “We talked it all through.”

Buying a car was a constant conversation. “If I wanted to buy a car, for example, Mr. Chris would tell me I needed to wait,” says Dycus. “It wasn’t the answer I wanted to hear, but in the end, it was a good idea to wait.”

Mundy still chuckles about their car battles. “I was trying to get her to think about the big picture and not to zero in on immediate things she wanted,” he said.

I can hear myself giving the same advice to my own son. 📣

## Dr. Phil Features Foster Youth and Supportive Senators



National CASA CEO Michael Piraino (left) in conversation with Dr. Phil McGraw and Steve Davidson, president of the Dr. Phil Foundation

On October 1, the “No Child Forgotten” episode of the *Dr. Phil Show* aired, focusing on older youth caught up in the foster care system. Dr. Phil and Robin McGraw are tireless spokespeople for the CASA cause. Appearing on the show were two political leaders at the forefront of improving the lives of youth in care and making changes in the system: Senators Mary Landrieu, D-Louisiana, and Charles Grassley, R-Iowa, co-chairs of the Senate Caucus on Foster Youth.

Sen. Grassley announced on the show that week’s release of the caucus’s *Call to Action*, a set of recommendations to build on successful policy improving the lives of youth in care. The timing of the report corresponded to the second anniversary of the enactment of the bipartisan *Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoption Act of 2008*, the most significant child welfare law in more than a decade.

 **Web Extra:** Learn more at [CASAforChildren.org/Policy](http://CASAforChildren.org/Policy).

Sen. Grassley commended the young people and professionals who volunteered their time to analyze the child welfare system and make suggestions for improvement. “One of the reasons that we set up the caucus was so that we could bring kids in who have dealt with this and been from home to home,” stated Grassley. “*Permanence* is a word I constantly hear from them.”

After hearing about one family’s painful struggle with the child welfare system, Sen. Landrieu noted, “We can avoid some of this heartbreak if the system would be better. We’re spending a lot of money and not getting the results, and we’re committed to changing it.”

Sen. Landrieu also made this plea to viewers: “*You could be a CASA volunteer. That’s a fabulous organization. You don’t have to be a lawyer. You just have to have a heart and a passion for kids. Show up and advocate for a child in the system.*”

Later in the show, Dr. Phil introduced Sam Martin and Wendy Ruiz, both foster care alumni who served as congressional interns this past year.

Addressing how the viewing audience could help, Sen. Grassley said, “Get your senators to join our caucus. Realize that as a constituent, you can make a difference.”

In the final segment, Dr. Phil introduced Michael Piraino, CEO of National CASA, who said, “We’ve got about 70,000 volunteers right now. We need to triple that. And then we can achieve our goal of serving every child who needs a CASA volunteer.”

Dr. Phil then made a strong pitch: “I want people to understand that everybody in this audience, everybody at home, can become a CASA. Please—this is something that you *can* do.” He then directed viewers to the [drphil.com](http://drphil.com) website for more information on how to volunteer.

The audience reaction to the October 1 broadcast was the largest response to any *Dr. Phil Show* since the first episode mentioning CASA programs aired in 2008. We received four times more visitors to our website after the show than during a typical four-day period.

But even more remarkable is that National CASA processed 5,915 volunteer inquiries through its website in those four days compared to the typical 312 inquiries. What’s more, our 2010 volunteer inquiry survey indicates that fully 19% of those inquiring who learn about the CASA movement from the *Dr. Phil Show* go on to volunteer and take a case. The impact is also reflected in two sample emails from grateful CASA and GAL directors:

*Within two hours from the Dr. Phil Show airing, we had received almost 30 inquiries from potential volunteers. Dr. Phil has made a huge difference on a daily basis and is truly inspirational to all of us!*

—Frank Prado, Guardian Ad Litem Program  
20th Judicial Circuit, Fort Myers, FL

*Our director of marketing and recruitment told me she had 80 phone calls yesterday. Wow!*

—Susan Kirkland, CASA of Orange County, CA

## National CASA Earns Renewal of Standards for Excellence Certification



We are proud to announce that National CASA has been recertified by the Standards for Excellence Institute as a leader in commitment to ethics and accountability in the nonprofit sector. This renews our 2007 recognition for excellence by the institute.



To signify certification, National CASA is permitted to feature the Standards for Excellence seal on our website and in printed materials. This seal benefits the organization by identifying us as an “employer of choice” to potential job candidates. In addition, a Standards of Excellence seal increases donor confidence and strengthens their trust that donations are well invested.

“We cannot expect the public to *assume* we are doing our jobs well,” says National CASA CEO Michael Piraino. “We owe it to the children we serve to make sure our organization is operated effectively, efficiently and ethically.”

For more information, visit [StandardsforExcellenceInstitute.org](http://StandardsforExcellenceInstitute.org).

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

For five days in August, National CASA collaborated with Wisconsin CASA and Kids Matter CASA to exhibit at the American Legion’s annual national convention in Milwaukee. A team of local staff members and CASA volunteers staffed the booth to increase awareness and recruit volunteers nationally.

In addition to being an important national outreach opportunity among nearly 13,000 Legionnaires from across the country—an ideal pool of potential volunteers—the convention was a chance to strengthen National CASA’s relationship with the American Legion Child Welfare Foundation. The booth was part of “Foundation Row,” a special section of exhibitors consisting of nonprofits the foundation has supported.

The foundation recently announced that it will fund National CASA’s development of a *Volunteer Flex Training Pre-Service Curriculum* that will be made available to CASA programs later



Bill Fowler (left), executive director of the Nevada CASA Association, former CASA-served youth Jessica Holden and Lance R. Jones, JD, program manager at Kids Matter CASA in Milwaukee, spoke at the American Legion’s annual national convention.

this year. The American Legion Child Welfare Foundation is a longtime supporter of National CASA, with grants funding national volunteer recruitment and training initiatives benefiting the network as a whole.

At the convention, National CASA also had the opportunity to make a presentation to the American Legion’s National Children and Youth Commission. The speaking team was led by Bill Fowler, veteran and executive director of the Nevada CASA Association, who has successfully partnered with the American Legion in his state to recruit volunteers as well as raise awareness and funds. Fowler was accompanied by Lance Jones, program manager at Kids Matter CASA in Milwaukee, and Jessica Holden, a former foster youth served by Kids Matter.

## The Connection Recognized with Three Spotlight Awards

*The Connection* has been recognized by the League of American Communications Professionals (LACP) with three 2010 Spotlight Awards:

- A Platinum Award (top prize) for excellence in the magazine/ newsletter category
- A Gold Medal (second prize) for most engaging communications material across all categories
- 10th most effective communications piece overall

“This year’s entry, *The Connection*, proves to be remarkable in light of tremendous competition,” says Christine Kennedy, LACP managing director. “More than 1,100 entries were received for the 2010 Spotlight Awards, comprising communications materials from more than a dozen countries. Overall, we find the relevance of this work to be superb, delivering a highly applicable and persuasive message. We classify this entry as being among the top 10 of all communications materials judged by LACP this year.”

The League of American Communications Professionals facilitates best practices within the public relations profession while recognizing those who demonstrate exemplary communications capabilities. More than 40% of Fortune 1000 companies have trusted the organization to evaluate their materials. 🗨️



# Developing Programs and Resources for Youth Transitioning to Adulthood

Tara Beckman  
Case Supervisor  
Alameda County CASA  
San Leandro, CA

In 2003, Alameda County CASA determined that it was imperative to extend our advocacy services to older youth and improve their success in transitioning to adulthood. We established a program to recruit volunteers to advocate for transitional-age youth and assist them with their emancipation needs.

Initially, the goal of the program was to serve youth 14–19 years of age. This continued to be the focus, but the priority shifted to serving youth who were closest to their emancipation. During the first few months of this project, I observed that many youth ages 17–19 were not on target to earn a high school diploma or GED and did not have any plans for housing, employment or post-secondary education. I believed that with one-on-one advocacy, CASA volunteers could support youth at a critical period in their lives and help improve these poor outcomes.

Since the inception of the program, Alameda County CASA has increased the number of older youth served by 50%. Our ongoing data collection already indicates that the program is improving the ability of emancipated foster youth to go on to successful and independent lives.

During the first year of this program, many volunteers felt overwhelmed with the complexity of the issues of older youth and became frustrated with navigating the system. To effectively advocate for this age group, we determined that volunteers required additional training, knowledge of resources for older youth and intensive case management. Alameda County CASA developed a curriculum, case-planning guides and other tools as well as enhanced supervision to provide adequate support to our volunteers.

One of the most significant new tools is our recently published *Guide to Independent Living for Transitional-Age and Emancipated Foster Youth* (see [bit.ly/transition\\_guide](http://bit.ly/transition_guide)). This publication is used by our volunteers and community partners to improve the outcomes of youth exiting the foster care system in Alameda County. The 214-page guide includes practical and easily accessible local and regional



The author with Duran Jefferson, 21, an alumnus of foster care who participates in the program's Youth Speakers Bureau and on the youth panel that helps educate new volunteers

information for our volunteers as well as for transitional-age youth themselves. It spotlights information about foster youth rights, education and health resources, emancipation planning, employment preparation and resources, housing, legal services and advocacy. In addition, there is an emancipation checklist that helps youth plan for independent living.

We hope our guide will educate and empower our youth in care. Other CASA programs are welcome to use it as a model. They may also borrow some of the text if they include the credit "Adapted from Alameda County CASA's *Guide to Independent Living for Transitional-Age and Emancipated Foster Youth*, copyright 2010."

To improve supervision offered to our advocates serving older youth, we now hold monthly volunteer support groups and offer continuing education. Advocates have an opportunity to discuss cases, express concerns, share resources and provide their case supervisor with feedback and suggestions to improve the quality of supervision and support. These groups provide advocates with ongoing assistance by both program staff and their fellow volunteers.

The results of this additional training and supervision have been significant. CASA volunteers have helped extend

youths' time in foster care to allow them to continue receiving needed support, assisted with college enrollment, helped them secure housing and employment and worked with them to set and achieve realistic goals. Advocates now work closely with the youth's support team to ensure timely completion of emancipation conferences.

In addition, volunteers are more proficient at offering assistance with completing tasks outlined in youths' transitional independent living plans. Finally, advocates are doing a better job of ensuring that items required by state law are addressed prior to a youth's dismissal from dependency. For example, the county welfare department is

required to ensure that youth are not emancipated without vital records, housing and other needed referrals.

Emancipation preparation is a time-consuming process. Advocates can make a significant difference during this critical period by providing consistent, one-on-one adult guidance to help youth successfully navigate the system. CASA volunteers can provide youth with modeling, consistency and advocacy for accessing supportive services and preparing for independent living. By encouraging, guiding, listening to and speaking up for foster youth, we believe we can help them reach their full potential and experience a positive, productive and successful future. 

# Building Hope for Youth!



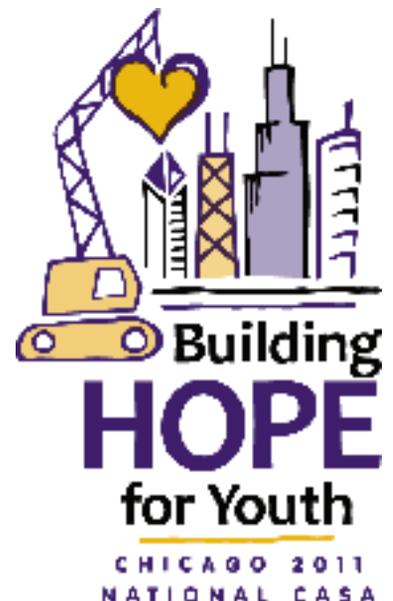
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## National CASA Association 30th Annual Conference

**March 19-22**

Hyatt Regency Chicago Hotel  
Chicago, IL

Register now at  
[CASAforChildren.org/Conference](http://CASAforChildren.org/Conference).



# Preparing for Adulthood

Lupe Tovar  
Program Development Specialist  
National Resource Center for Youth Development



Are you a teen who recently aged out of foster care? Are you preparing to leave care soon? I aged out about a decade ago and know there's a lot to think about as you plan for your future. No worries—there are many resources out there to assist you in answering the questions you have so you can start creating a transition plan for yourself. Until recently, I worked at FosterClub, so let's start with some of my favorite *free* transitional resources they have created with tons of input from hundreds of youth who have already transitioned out of care.

## FosterClub (FosterClub.com)

FosterClub is the national network for young people in foster care. The organization has 20,000 members across the country. Their new *Transition Toolkit* ([bit.ly/Transition\\_Toolkit](http://bit.ly/Transition_Toolkit)) is designed to help you and your team of adult supporters take inventory of your current assets, identify your resources and map out a plan. Many of us have the fear of never having a forever family or a network of supporters. A valuable tool to help you in planning for a



life filled with positive circles of supporters is FosterClub's *Permanency Pact* ([bit.ly/Perm\\_Pact](http://bit.ly/Perm_Pact)). This free resource guides you in assembling positive, kin-like relationships with supportive adults. This tool has transformed my life; I have unofficially adopted members to my family as aunts, siblings and grandparents. It has also helped me succeed in joining a sorority, which in turn has brought me a nationwide network of sisters (ThetaNuXi.org). I have used the *Permanency Pact* to become a better big sister and aunt to my biological family as well. The hardest part for me was asking people I was already close to if it was okay for me to visit them on holidays or to call me on my birthday. Be sure to ask—they'll say yes!

## National Resource Center for Youth Development (NRCYD.ou.edu)

I had to travel halfway across the country to my new job at NRCYD. Talk about a transition! Did you know that you may be able to receive *free money* through Education and Training Vouchers (ETV)? In 2001, Congress passed a law that made ETV available to youth in care. The vouchers can help you continue

your education. NRCYD has spent the past year analyzing how states have carried out the program. The result is *Educating Youth in Care: The First Year of Education and Training Vouchers* (see [bit.ly/ET\\_Voucher](http://bit.ly/ET_Voucher)). NRCYD also offers a pocket workbook you may be interested in: *A Future Near Me—Questions to Guide a Young Adult Toward Self-Sufficiency* ([bit.ly/A\\_Future](http://bit.ly/A_Future)). It includes 100 questions to consider. A version specifically for American Indian/Alaska Native youth is available at [bit.ly/Path\\_Before](http://bit.ly/Path_Before).

## Child Welfare Information Gateway (ChildWelfare.gov)

This website provides a wealth of resources for you and the adults who support you. It includes information on scholarships and tuition waivers you might be eligible for ([bit.ly/FY\\_Scholarships](http://bit.ly/FY_Scholarships)).

## Foster Care Alumni of America (FosterCareAlumni.org)

FCAA is a national nonprofit founded and led by alumni of the foster care system. Their mission is to connect you with the alumni community and to transform foster care policy and practice. Their book, *Flux: Life After Foster Care*, answers the question "What do I wish someone had told me when I was 15, 18, 25?" *Flux* provides context to your emotions and real-life examples of challenges and opportunities during this complicated transition. While it won't make the journey easy, it will help you make sense of it. Order online at [bit.ly/FCAA\\_Store](http://bit.ly/FCAA_Store) or call (703) 299-6767.

## National CASA (CASAforChildren.org/Adulthood)

Visit the National CASA website for a wealth of resources for you or the adults supporting you through your transition to independence.

I want to thank National CASA for their efforts in promoting resources for teens in foster care. The key is *planning* for your future. I wish I had had an article like this ten years ago when I aged out. Through taking inventory of what is available to you, you will be able to make any goal you set into a goal you can achieve! Best wishes to you in transitioning into independence. Ask the questions you need to, and educate yourself on how to be the manager of your own future. If you have any questions, please look for me at [NRCYD.ou.edu](http://NRCYD.ou.edu). 📩

*Lupe Tovar spent 20 years in Arizona's foster care system waiting for a permanent family. During this time, she moved more than 11 times, enrolled in 11 different schools and lived with more than 35 foster brothers and sisters.*

# A World Without Advocates

Chris Steigerwald, M.Ed, LSW  
Program Director  
CASA for KIDS of Geauga County  
Chardon, OH

**I**n a county without a CASA or GAL program, a 1-year-old girl we'll call "Annie" was removed by Child Protective Services due to substance abuse by her parents.

After several months, Annie was placed with a relative who lived in an adjoining county. No one told the court that this cousin was mildly mentally impaired. No one investigated to find that she had a previous CPS record with substantiated abuse regarding her teenage children. *How might things have been different with a CASA volunteer?*

Court records indicate that the parents reached an agreement for the relative to be awarded legal custody. No one asked for a mental health assessment or home study of the cousin. *How might things have been different with a CASA volunteer?*

A one-line entry in the same court document that awarded the relative legal custody stated "that all parental rights are hereby terminated." There was no discussion in the court order of the grounds for termination of parental rights or whether such an action was in Annie's best interest. *How might things have been different with a CASA volunteer?*

Several years went by. Annie and her legal custodian moved to an adjoining county. Child Protective Services became involved when the school reported concerns. It was found that Annie had many bruises in various stages of healing. Annie was removed from the home by CPS and placed in foster care. Fortunately, there *was* a CASA program in this county, and a volunteer was appointed by the court to represent Annie's best interest.

## ***Here's how things were different with a CASA volunteer.***

Once assigned, the volunteer spent time with Annie and the people in her life. Annie's CASA volunteer learned that her custodian had severely physically abused her and punished her by withholding food. The volunteer also learned that Annie's legal status was in doubt because her parents were deprived of due process.

*Once she had a CASA volunteer, everything in Annie's life was different.* Annie was placed in a caring foster home. The volunteer facilitated communication and coordination to address Annie's health, emotional and education needs. Annie experienced significant physical and academic growth after finally receiving good nutrition and a safe, nurturing



The author with her grandson, Jacob

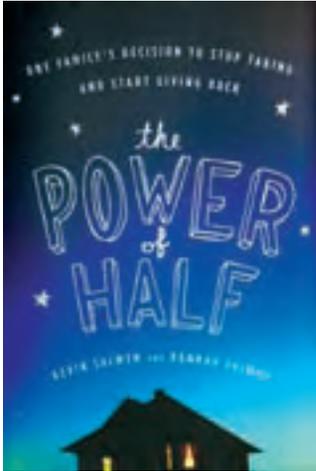
home. The CASA volunteer secured funds from Friends of CASA to provide tutoring, in addition to special services at school, to enhance her academic performance.

The new judge declared the previous court order invalid and ordered that Annie's parents be included in court proceedings. The birth parents were still not able to provide an appropriate home, but the birth father gave the name of his adult daughter in another state. She did not initially respond to the CPS agency. But the CASA volunteer persisted by calling the sister directly.

This sister had learned of Annie's existence only a year before and was searching for her. She was very interested in being considered as a placement option but was confused by the requirements made by the CPS staff. The CASA volunteer helped her to feel comfortable with the process. The sister complied with all requirements to prove she could provide the safe, nurturing and permanent home that Annie deserved. She came to visit Annie, and they began to develop a strong relationship. The CASA volunteer helped the sister prepare to meet Annie's academic and counseling needs. After several months, Annie was excited to move to her sister's home.

A happy ending certainly—but one that could have happened so much sooner with so much less damage to Annie had a volunteer advocate been assigned to the case in the beginning. What if Annie's custodian had not moved to a county with a CASA program? Would Annie be the lead story on the news: another one of those tragedies that provoke our grief and anger because "things didn't need to happen that way"?

Annie's story reminds us that there are many more children still in need of the powerful voice of a volunteer advocate. Those children can't afford for us to be complacent. 🗨️



## The Power of Half

By Kevin Salwen and Hannah Salwen; Houghton Mifflin Harcourt; hmhbooks.com; 2010; 242 pages

Last summer, Bill Gates and Warren Buffett issued a challenge that commentators said could change the face of philanthropy. They asked 400 of the richest Americans to commit half of their fortunes to their favorite causes via a “Giving Pledge.”

Nearly two years earlier, an idealistic teenager from Atlanta, GA, had a similar idea. Hannah and her father were driving down the road when she spotted something we have all seen—a homeless man standing beside the road holding a cardboard sign: HUNGRY, HOMELESS,

PLEASE HELP. A second man was also in her field of vision. This one was driving a black Mercedes coupe.

The injustice she recognized in the juxtaposition of images of wealth and poverty outraged Hannah and set her family on a journey that strengthened them in unanticipated ways. Hannah and her father, a former *Wall Street Journal* reporter and editor, chronicle their adventure in *The Power of Half*.

“Never accept things as they are when we have the chance to improve them” was an unspoken mantra to which the Salwens had always subscribed. A successful family, Kevin and Joan raised their children to give back in the ways that many families do: periodically volunteering at the local food bank, contributing to charity, participating in Habitat for Humanity projects. But in her youthful outrage about the inequities in the world, 14-year-old Hannah challenged her family to do more. And they agreed.

Together, Hannah, her teenage brother Joseph, mother Joan and father Kevin decided that they would sell their Atlanta dream home, valued at \$1.6 million, move into an \$800,000 home and contribute the difference to charity. Led by Joan, a business executive turned school teacher, the family embarked on a systematic process of researching global problems and the organizations

addressing them. Experiencing alternating feelings of uncertainty and excitement, fear and empowerment, the family ultimately entrusted their donation to the Hunger Project, an organization battling global hunger through community development.

*The Power of Half* chronicles the Salwens’ process of downsizing and selecting a beneficiary for their generosity, but the book is not just about the money they gave away. It is primarily about what the family gained in the process.

In a chapter titled “The Treadmill,” Kevin Salwen describes how the family was happily living the American Dream of financial success and accumulation. But only when the family set out as a team to address the inequity that outraged Hannah did they realize the richness downsizing would bring to their lives. As Kevin Salwen told *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof:

*We essentially traded stuff for togetherness and connectedness.... This is the most self-interested thing we have ever done. I'm thrilled that we can help others. I'm blown away by how much it has helped us.*

You can learn more about the Salwen family and see television interviews with them by visiting their website: [thepowerofhalf.com](http://thepowerofhalf.com). 📺

### GET CONNECTED!

The National CASA Association hosts and participates in 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.

#### CASAforChildren.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. The site also meets the resource needs of CASA program staff and volunteers.



#### CASAforChildren.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.



#### CASA Blog, Facebook and Twitter

Connect with our community, read the latest news, and join ongoing discussions at [Facebook.com/CASAforChildren](https://www.facebook.com/CASAforChildren). Follow CEO Michael Piraino at [Twitter.com/CASAforChildren](https://twitter.com/CASAforChildren). And visit our new blog at [Blog.CASAforChildren.org](http://Blog.CASAforChildren.org).



## 2010 Kids Count Data Book Now Available

According to the Annie E. Casey Foundation's *2010 Kids Count Data Book*, overall improvements in child well-being that began in the late 1990s stalled in the years just before the current economic downturn. For example, more than 1 million more children were living in poverty in 2008 than in 2000. The full impact of the economic downturn on children and families will not be evident for years. The annual *Data Book* profiles the well-being of children on a state-by-state basis and ranks states on 10 measures of well-being. Visit the Data Center to review national and state profiles or to download or order the book at [bit.ly/Kids\\_Count](http://bit.ly/Kids_Count).

## Recession Leads to Increase in Child Abuse

New research presented at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Pediatrics described the likely long-range consequences of the recession on the well-being of children. For every 1% increase in unemployment, researchers found an increase in child abuse reports of at least 0.5 per 1,000 children one year later. Unemployment in the US has risen from 4.5% in 2007 to 9.6% in October 2010. The findings of this study highlight the need to maintain services that protect children and help families during economic loss. Read the abstract of the study at [bit.ly/recession\\_effects](http://bit.ly/recession_effects). *Time* magazine's coverage of the story is available at [bit.ly/Time\\_recession](http://bit.ly/Time_recession).

## Statistics Show Past Decade's Drop in Number of Children in Care, Increase in Adoptions

The US Children's Bureau has released updated Adoption and Foster Care Reporting and Analysis System (AFCARS) statistics showing that the "snapshot" number of children in care on a given day—September 30—has declined by nearly 100,000 children, from 523,000 in 2002 to 424,000 in 2009. (Note that the number of children in care over a year's time is over 700,000.) Adoptions have increased over the decade to a

high of 57,000 in 2009. To see the data, go to: [bit.ly/AFCARS\\_2009](http://bit.ly/AFCARS_2009).

## Advocating for Very Young Children in Dependency Proceedings

The American Bar Association (ABA) has released a new Practice & Policy Brief, *Advocating for Very Young Children in Dependency Proceedings: The Hallmarks of Effective, Ethical Representation*, by Candice Maze, JD. The brief explains how attorneys representing very young children can profoundly influence the health, development and well-being of their clients. Included are four hallmarks of advocacy that enhance effectiveness of representation and strengthen an attorney's ability to handle ethical dilemmas. Read the brief online at [bit.ly/infant\\_advocacy](http://bit.ly/infant_advocacy).

## Early Childhood Experiences Have Lasting Effects

Experiences between birth and age 5 matter significantly to children's long-term emotional and psychological health, and changing these experiences for the better pays dividends, according to several articles in the May issue of *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine*. Content provides "key, actionable evidence of how we can manipulate the early environment of children and make a tangible difference in their health," write Dimitri A. Christakis, MD, MPH, and Frederick P. Rivara, MD, MPH, of the University of Washington and Seattle Children's Research Institute. Read the *ScienceDaily* summary of the issue at [bit.ly/early\\_experience](http://bit.ly/early_experience).

## Strong Adult-Youth Relations Predict Permanency

A study in the current issue of *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* found that adoption likelihood can best be predicted by how well youth are integrated into their foster homes. The researchers stressed the importance of the youth's developing strong relationships with adults in achieving any type of permanency. An unexpected

finding was that behavior problems were not related to permanency outcomes. To read the abstract, go to [bit.ly/adopt\\_prediction](http://bit.ly/adopt_prediction).

## Maternal Incarceration

More than 150,000 American children have mothers who are in prison—a population that grew 122% between 1991 and 2007. A new multistate study examines the lives of incarcerated mothers, their children and the challenge of rebuilding successful lives. The report, *Childhood Disrupted: Understanding the Features and Effects of Maternal Incarceration*, can be downloaded by going to [bit.ly/maternal\\_incarc](http://bit.ly/maternal_incarc). National CASA recently released a podcast on this topic, which can be found at [bit.ly/family\\_connect](http://bit.ly/family_connect).

## New Report Finds Child Abuse Rate of 0% in Lesbian Households

A research center on sexual orientation law and public policy at the UCLA School of Law has announced new findings from the long-running US National Longitudinal Lesbian Family Study. In an article published in the *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, the Williams Institute noted that none of the 78 adolescents interviewed reported having ever been physically or sexually abused by a parent or other caregiver. This contrasts with 26% of all adolescents who report parent or caregiver physical abuse and 8.3% who report sexual abuse. See the *Huffington Post* article at [huff.to/zero\\_abuse](http://huff.to/zero_abuse).

## 38 States Increase Adoptions from Foster Care

The US Department of Health and Human Services recently announced that 38 states will receive incentive awards for increasing the number of children adopted from foster care. States receive payments for every adoption over their 2007 baseline levels and incentives for children over age 9 or who have special needs. To read a full list of recipients, go to [bit.ly/adopt\\_awards](http://bit.ly/adopt_awards). 



Results of a major landscaping project carried out by community volunteers

**Volunteers and Donors Make Possible CASA Office’s “Extreme Makeover”**  
**CASA of Pueblo, CO**

In June, CASA of Pueblo held a yard sale to fund the purchase of materials for new landscaping for its office building. Several local groups and companies then came together in various ways to help. A Boy Scout troop installed the irrigation system. Several tons of rock were donated by a local company. Then the rock and sod (provided at a steep discount) were spread by staff from yet another business. The local Lowes store donated materials and then sent a crew out to plant flower beds and create a patio area. As Executive Director Zane Grant put it, “It was like an extreme makeover since it happened in just one week’s time.” To see a video of the transformation, visit [bit.ly/CASA\\_Pueblo](http://bit.ly/CASA_Pueblo).

**Sand Sculpture Artfest Benefits CASA Program**  
**CASA of Grant County, Inc., Marion, IN**

The second annual *Sand Sculpture Artfest* took place in July in Marion, IN. The city and the Parks and Recreation Department teamed up again with CASA of Grant County, Inc. to make its event fun for all involved. Nineteen teams



Event sponsor First Farmers Bank and Trust’s “Herbie the Love Bug.” Bank Vice President Michael Belcher, father of Bradley and Lauren (see photo above right), is on the program’s fundraising committee.

of community members competed for awards. Over 120 tons of donated sand filled two giant sand boxes and were transformed into designs including a troll, a billiard table and the CASA logo. Numerous donors supplied over \$21,000 through sponsorships, cash contributions, materials and services to make the event a success. Drawing prizes included gift certificates donated by area businesses.



(From left): April Raver, Austin Hendricks, Claire Hendricks, Bradley Belcher and Lauren Belcher from Westminster Presbyterian Church, winners of the People’s Choice Award for their “OctoCASApus.” Austin and Claire are the children of CASA of Grant County, Inc. Executive Director Leslie Hendricks. Bradley and Lauren Belcher thought up the fundraising event.

**Advocate Named Volunteer of the Year by Governor’s Project**  
**Alexandria/Arlington County CASA Program, Alexandria, VA**

Since 2006, Lindsay Warner has been a volunteer with the Alexandria/Arlington CASA Program. In that time, she has volunteered more than 600 hours and advocated for five children. In June, Warner was named Volunteer



Lindsay Warner, holding her award, with (from left) CASA Program Director Carrie Cannon, SCAN Executive Director Sonia Quiñónez and CASA Case Supervisor Dana Taylor

of the Year by the Family and Children’s Trust Fund, which is administered by a board of trustees appointed by the governor and benefits family violence prevention, treatment and public awareness programs throughout Virginia.

### Luggage Sets Benefit Foster Children Throughout New Mexico

#### CASA of Lea County, Hobbs, NM

CASA of Lea County Volunteer Coordinator Ann Murdock and Executive Director Anita Braun asked one simple question that resulted in a significant donation from Staples, Inc. While placing an online order for office supplies, Murdock was notified that the purchase qualified the program to receive a free three-piece luggage set. Braun wondered if many of the promotional luggage sets went unclaimed. After a series of phone calls, Staples offered to donate all unclaimed luggage sets to the program—2,701 in all! Braun and Murdock soon realized there were enough luggage sets to give one to each child in care served by not only their program—but all 17 New Mexico CASA programs. “All kids deserve more than to have their belongings thrown into trash bags when they are removed from their homes or shuttled between foster home placements,” stated Braun. “Staples’ support not only gives them a material gift but helps restore the dignity that so often has been stripped away by being in the system.”



Anita Braun (left) and Ann Murdock with luggage donated by Staples



Beth Frankenberg (center) receives the award from *Nashville Business Journal* President and Publisher Kate Herman and Editor Lance Williams.

tell me what great work CASA does.” She notes that in the next two years, her program is planning a major expansion so that they can serve every child in the county who needs a volunteer. “Hopefully, the attention that comes from this will help us reach that goal.”

### Twenty-Year Advocate Honored in Louisiana

#### CASA of Jefferson Parish Juvenile Court, Harvey, LA

Jessie James recently celebrated her retirement after 20 years as a volunteer with CASA of Jefferson Parish Juvenile Court. James was honored with a party, where a tearful Cynthia Chauvin, CASA Jefferson’s director, introduced a new award for volunteers that will be named the Jessie James Distinguished Service Award. As a child, James knew that she wanted to help children. “My stepmother raised us five kids as her own, and one day I knew I would pay it forward by helping other children, too.” She has advocated for 18 children within the Jefferson Parish Juvenile Court system. James has also raised 2 biological, 2 adopted and 12 foster children.



**Web Extra:** See the Field Notes feature at [CASAforChildren.org/Connection](http://CASAforChildren.org/Connection) for two bonus stories: a black-tie bowling fundraiser by CASA of Larimer County in Colorado and a mural by art students for the office of CASA of Mercer County in New Jersey. 🗨️

# Uganda Village



Recently, a CASA volunteer had a chance to use her advocacy skills to benefit children in Africa. Fran Follett, an advocate with CASA for Lancaster County in Lincoln, NE, spent two weeks in Uganda this past August volunteering at Hope Children's Home. A team representing Show Mercy International, based in Albany, OR, arranged the opportunity.

"School was on holiday while we were there, so we basically hung out with the kids," said Follett. "Some organized activities included a Sunday school class, having the children write to their sponsors

and library time. There is no foster care in Uganda, so children who have lost their parents or have been abandoned are sent to children's group homes if the village decides not to care for them. We understood that if an infant or small child is under the care of the village, that child can be claimed by someone in the village at the age of 5. It may be someone who wants a child, a wife, a slave (or someone to sell for slave labor). Or it may be a pedophile. Escaping these dangers are the 94 children living in Hope Children's Home." 

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

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



## Supporting Older Youth in Family Court

Judge Glenda A. Hatchett  
National CASA Spokesperson

I think it's wonderful that National CASA has a strategic focus on supporting youth who are transitioning to independence. We've got to figure out how we can help these teenagers reach their full potential. We need to be creative and think outside the box. What kind of resources can we pull in? What kind of encouragement can we give these young people? This is why CASA and GAL volunteers are so critically important.

I remember vividly a youth coming into my courtroom in Atlanta under tragic circumstances. In fact I talk about her in my new book, *Dare to Take Charge*. This girl suffers sexual abuse by her mother's boyfriend over a long period of time. It finally gets to the point that she can't take it anymore and confides in a counselor. When the case comes to court, the mother says, "Well, she's promiscuous—my boyfriend *did not* molest her!" In spite of the evidence, the mother simply doesn't believe her daughter. And now I have this precious child with no place to go. So she has to be placed in foster care.

One of the conversations I had with her was, "What is your dream for your life?" It turns out she wanted to go to Spelman College. I made a few calls to help her get an interview at the college, and she was accepted. With today's caseloads, it's rare that a family court judge has the time to give this kind of individualized attention. As a judge I might see thousands of youth in a year's time. But a CASA volunteer works with one or two sibling groups at a time, and that makes all the difference.

This particular young woman graduated with a degree in social welfare and became a worker for the Department of Family and Social Services—realizing an admirable goal to help children in the circumstance she was originally in. The extra support she needed to get there is what our advocates offer every day. They find resources for teens who often have no one else looking out for them.

I remember another remarkable teen who came into my courtroom. His mother was a refugee from Ethiopia, and she

ended up passing away after battling cancer. So here's this young man who can't go back to his native country, where his only remaining family live, for political reasons. I had to bring him into care. Now I happen to have a colleague whose wife is Ethiopian. This woman helped get the young man connected with the Ethiopian community in Atlanta. Together we mentored him and helped him find scholarships and other resources. Because of his new support system, he got through college.

About a year ago I was at the bookstore and ran into this young man. We greeted each other warmly. It turns out he's thriving. He is gainfully employed and has a fiancée. But I really think about what would have happened if we had just opened the door and said, "Here's your stipend—go out on your own in this foreign country with absolutely no connections to anyone and figure it out." Where would he go? What would he do? How could he have possibly done as well as he's doing now?

Now success takes many forms. The two young adults I've told you about are perhaps at the extreme end of the scale. But often success is simply being able to support oneself and feel connected to family, whether it's the one we were born into, adopted into—or one we create for ourselves with caring friends.

CASA volunteers make up a marvelous network that reaches all across the country and makes a huge difference in the lives of our children. They point young people in the right direction and say, "OK, you're aging out of foster care. What about us getting you into college? What about a vocational or job training program? What can we do to support you in making your boldest dreams come true?"

There's a chapter in my new book that talks about how your past does not have to define your future. I know that so many of the young people we work with have had tremendous challenges. However, today is full of potential and hope. So please join me and the thousands of CASA volunteers across the country in encouraging youth not to live in the grips of the past. We have to let them know that we are cheering for them, that we really believe in them and that we want them to see a better tomorrow. 📣

*Hon. Glenda A. Hatchett is an authority on juvenile issues known for her award-winning television series Judge Hatchett. Her new book Dare to Take Charge came out recently. See Judge Hatchett's websites for more information: [glendahatchett.com](http://glendahatchett.com) and [parentpowernow.com](http://parentpowernow.com).*

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