

Everyday Heroes CASA Brings Help and Hope to Children in Need

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by Sara Browning

Court Appointed Special Advocates of Peoria County takes a stand to ensure that every child has a safe and permanent home.

People hear about them almost every day in the newspaper, on television or in the news—the abused and neglected children within the juvenile court system and the attorneys appointed to defend them. But much less is heard about the men and women who volunteer their time to serve on those children’s behalf, the everyday heroes who advocate for the rights of young people, fight for their welfare and act on the belief that every child has the right to fulfill his or her potential.

Beginning CASA

Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) of Peoria County has been serving abused and neglected children for over half a decade. But the special initiative to help children in their journey through the courts began over 30 years ago, in 1976, when Superior Court Judge David Soukup of Seattle, Washington, saw a recurring problem in the courtroom: he never felt as though he had sufficient information to make the right decisions concerning a child’s future.

In order to ensure that the welfare of each child was represented clearly and adequately in court, Judge Soukup obtained funding to recruit and train community volunteers to step into courtrooms on children’s behalf as CASAs. In 1982, the National CASA Association was formed and today represents over 950 local CASA programs across the country. More than 70,000 CASA volunteers serve approximately 280,000 children every year.

The “Best-Kept Secret”

Today, approximately 45 CASA volunteers represent the best interests of over 100 abused and neglected children in the juvenile courts through CASA of Peoria County, which was created in 2005. Executive Director Pam Perrilles says that her favorite aspect of the job is simply the privilege of carrying out its mission: *to ensure that every abused and neglected child is placed in a permanent home by utilizing CASA volunteers for children going through the court system.*

“Watching the dedication of our volunteers and knowing the difference that they make in a child’s life—it’s something kids can look back on and remember that someone was there to advocate for them,” says Perrilles. “I believe CASA is one of the best-kept secrets in Peoria.”

Making Sacrifices

Community volunteers make CASA an organization unlike any other of its kind. Perrilles recalls a memorable case in which a caseworker placed a child in a residential facility in the Chicago area. “The caseworker was retiring, and she didn’t want the child to fall through the cracks. She came to me and said she wanted a CASA volunteer to drive to Chicago once a month to see this child. The very first CASA volunteer I called committed to the case. She drives every month to Chicago to see this child.”

Perrilles says she is always moved when she receives updates from this volunteer. “She spends Thanksgiving Day with this child. It’s a huge sacrifice on her part.”

As executive director, Perrilles is always looking for ways to help more children. “One of my goals for CASA is to secure enough funding to expand the program to Tazewell County and other counties in our circuit,” she says. “As of September...our organization had 1,038 pending abuse and neglect cases. We serve an average of up to 100 kids per year, which accounts for only nine to 10 percent of the total population of abused and neglected children.”

An Invaluable Help

Through the eyes of a child in Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) custody waiting for a permanent home, a CASA volunteer is a symbol of hope. Working independently from the social services system, the CASA’s sole concern is the best interest of the child. The individual serves as a spokesperson, an objective adult to provide the court with independent information. A volunteer’s influence can make the difference between homelessness and a safe home; between dropping out of school and receiving a degree; between jail and becoming a successful, productive member of society.

Due to the high level of responsibility, CASA volunteers undergo approximately 30 hours of special training on everything from court procedures and laws to the process whereby a court case enters the system through a hotline call.

“Our volunteers consist of attorneys, social workers and foster parents,” says Pam, adding that a volunteer is not required to hold any of these positions. “The biggest quality we look for in a volunteer is commitment. The child must know he or she can count on you.”

Volunteers are able to spend as much time as needed to gather information regarding the child and the child’s familial system. A CASA provides information to the judge to help determine the child’s best interest in terms of a permanent home. A CASA who can tell the court, “I was with the child, and this is what I observed,” is invaluable.

Building Trust

Greg Birkland, president of BSC Funding, has been a CASA volunteer for over two years and also serves on the CASA Board of Directors. Married for 25 years and with two children of his own, Birkland has a heart to help young people. “I wanted to help kids better themselves. I researched other organizations that support children and found CASA to be a good fit for my family and me.”

As a volunteer-in-training, Birkland learned about community service as well as the various cultures of the children he would serve through CASA. He says the cases are challenging as well as rewarding. After volunteering for a year, Birkland began serving on the CASA board in July 2009 after realizing the value he could bring to the organization. He continues to volunteer and serve the children he has been assigned to.

“One of my cases involved a child that was heading down the wrong path. There were family issues, society issues and peer pressure influences. I knew this child needed a voice. I worked with him for over a year and he is definitely on a better path today.”

Being a CASA volunteer involves learning about a child’s past, present and future and speaking on behalf of his or her needs. Knowing that he can have a solid influence on a child is Birkland’s favorite part. “I enjoy interacting with the child and getting issues resolved in a timely manner,” he says, although he admits that gaining the trust of a child and the relatives is sometimes challenging.

“There’s a trust factor you have to establish with the child and their family. But once that trust is established, I’m viewed as a true advocate for the child. I get support from the family because they recognize I am there to provide support and offer a positive influence. It’s very meaningful to know I’m having that much of an impact in a child’s life.”

A Constant, Consistent Support System

Nicole Painter, a CASA volunteer since May 2009, has also dedicated her time to making a difference in children’s lives. Having adopted five foster children, she says she was still looking for a way to give back. CASA was the perfect fit.

“I went through 30 hours of training before my swearing-in ceremony. My first case was one of my most rewarding. I watched a father who had been separated from his family receive news that he could return home to his children, who had also recently returned home. It was exciting for me because I was the person who was able to report the good news.”

For Painter, simply having opportunities to speak with the children is precious. “I asked a little girl in one of my cases: ‘Where do you want to live?’ and she said, ‘With my mom and grandma.’ Then she looked at me and asked, ‘Where do you want to live?’ Knowing that at the end of the day you’ve given a child a voice in front of the judge—it’s such a wonderful thing to get to be that constant person in a child’s life and help them find that other constant person. It helps a child find her place in life. I feel like it’s worth everything!”

Painter says she is always conscious of the ever-present need to help children. “There’s always children out there. There’s always a need. These kids need someone, and there’s so many of them. But it’s great work, and you’ll never regret it.”

Perrilles says the journey has been long, but rewarding. “It’s not always easy. But we’ve had great support from past board members who continue to help carry the torch...The most powerful seed you can plant in a child is to let them know there is hope.” **iBi**

Individuals interested in becoming CASA volunteers should email mwelch@peoriacounty.org or call (309) 669-2939 to set up an appointment. If you'd like to make a difference in the lives of local children but do not wish to serve as a CASA volunteer, visit casapeoria.org to learn about other opportunities.

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