



CASA Lake County

Volunteer Voices

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Nearly a decade ago, the *Chicago Tribune* ran several sad and disturbing articles about abused children and the court system. I saved the most hopeful of these stories, a column describing the work of CASA volunteers. Could I make such an important commitment in addition to my business and my family? What about the heartbreak that must come with such a job? My questions remained in the back of my mind as I enrolled in a CASA volunteer training class. In November 2003, Andrea “Andy” Tick and I graduated from that class and took our first case—as a CASA team.

When Andy and I met the seven siblings in our case, the oldest was only eight years old. Their 22-year-old mother had serious cognitive limitations and couldn’t provide minimal care for her children, even with support services. Three of her children were thriving in foster care with their maternal grandparents. The remaining four still lived with their mother. We saw huge challenges ahead for all the children, especially the four still living with their mother. As officers of the court, however, we could help keep them safe and give them a chance at a better future. Opportunities to help arose at every turn.

We discovered that one of the children still with his mother was school-aged but had never been to school. We helped to enroll him and advocated for services to help him make up for lost time. Not long after, we noticed a startling lump extending from the four-year-old’s abdomen and urged his mother to consult with a doctor. As a result, the child had surgery to correct a potentially life-threatening intestinal condition. Every day in the mother’s home brought additional risks. A fire erupted while the children were unsupervised. A violent boyfriend threatened the children and their mother.

Within months after taking the case, we testified in court about conditions in the mother’s home and the four remaining children were taken into care. We stayed close to them as they moved through multiple foster placements in two counties. Working with foster parents and teachers, we helped to obtain developmental assessments, therapy and special education services. We grew close to all seven children and hoped that somehow they could be reunited in a safe and permanent home. With a family this large, however, social-service professionals predicted that it would never happen.

The grandparents continued their steady, loving care for three of the children. Over time, as foster placements for the other siblings repeatedly fell through, the grandparents opened their home to all seven children. Both grandparents were employed but they struggled to make ends meet. Meanwhile, an administrative delay deprived the family of more than \$1,400 in monthly foster-care stipends. We reported the error to the court and—with the full stipends in place—the court approved permanent subsidized guardianship for all seven children with their grandparents. Against the odds, the children were reunited in their grandparents’ care and could still be in touch with their mother, who lived nearby.

After our case closed, Andy became an Advocate Manager with CASA Lake County. She remains a valued friend. I still have the newspaper clipping that led me to become a CASA volunteer. Now I know how good it feels to welcome an abused or neglected child into my life and be able to help. I’ve seen how a CASA partnership can strengthen advocacy and provide moral support. In April 2009, I gladly took a new case, partnering with Lillian Gonzalez, another committed CASA volunteer. Together, we advocate for young siblings who have suffered sexual abuse. We have alerted the court to dangers still facing the children and are hopeful that they can be safely and permanently reunited with their family.

Ron Lee
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THREE WORDS: A PROMISE TO KEEP

At some point during the first conversation I have with a new CASA kid, I make a three-word promise: I tell him “I will always be in your corner ***no matter what.***”

In my 8 years as a CASA I’ve become something of a specialist, working with teen-age boys. That promise offers something these boys have never had: an element of stability in their lives: something that will not change.

Usually, my promise is met with skepticism. Who can blame these boys? Stability is something they’ve never experienced in their chaotic lives. Change has been a way of life. They’ve been placed in two, three or more foster homes, had multiple case workers, therapists, and bounced from one new school to another. Now, here’s another adult working in the system with a promise the likes of which is virtually impossible to conceive.

But how easy it is to win that boy over! I make it a point to see him regularly. If something good should happen, I’m there to share the moment. On the other hand, if it is a problem, he gets my sympathy, and more importantly, my support. He’ll find that, ***no matter what,*** I will not be judgmental. He knows I will be talking regularly to his foster parents, his educators, his physician and his therapists. He knows that my reports to the Court will always be fair and accurate. – always... ***no matter what.***

Over time he and I will develop a relationship marked not so much by friendship, but respect. Soon I find myself invited to birthday parties, graduations, and best of all, even adoption ceremonies.

In the end, I firmly believe I will have given him a gift he will treasure his entire adult life.