

The Experience of a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) Volunteer & The Foster Children Of Clark County

By Rita R.



Nearly three years ago, as I sat at a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) orientation, learning about these children for the first time, I realized that I couldn't walk away without being a part of the solution. The solution was becoming a CASA volunteer. CASA volunteers advocate for the best interest of abused and neglected children in the child welfare system. CASA volunteers are appointed by a Dependency Judge/Hearing Master to become a sworn officer of the court and assigned to represent one child or a sibling group. CASA volunteers work alongside the children's team of case workers, foster parents, natural parents, therapists and legal counsel, with the main goal of ensuring children's needs are met and they are thriving in safe, loving and permanent home. CASA volunteers do so by attending meetings, reviewing documents, observing visitations between children and natural parents, and communicating with anyone who is involved on the children's team. Most importantly, a CASA volunteer visits the children on a regular and consistent basis and is there for the children as they often times transition through multiple placements and schools. A CASA volunteer's role is always unpredictable, but nevertheless important.

As a CASA volunteer, I have advocated on behalf of seven (7) amazing children, ranging from the ages of 3 to 16. My first case includes a sibling group of four (4) toddlers. As their CASA volunteer, I made sure I was present in their lives and sometimes was required to plan impromptu play sessions, when their natural parents did not show up for scheduled visitations. I have watched as these children lost their father to incarceration and an eventual deportation, and their mother's parental rights terminated, after succumbing to a life of drug abuse. However, not only have I been present for the unfortunate events occurring in their lives, I have also been fortunate to experience significant milestones with these four toddlers. I watched the oldest child enter kindergarten and the youngest child learn to speak and be successfully potty-trained. I also unknowingly became the first to ever take these children to see their first movie at a movie theater. I have also watched as they successfully transitioned from a foster home into the home of their paternal grandparents, who are now their adoptive resource, patiently awaiting their adoption finalization.

Less than a year after becoming a CASA volunteer, I took on a second case involving teenagers, as an attempt to serve more of a mentorship

role. I never expected what came next. What I thought would be a fight to have two siblings, ages 13 and 14, be adopted together, turned out to be so much more. I quickly learned that these two siblings had a 16 year old sister. Sadly, the older sister had run away from the system a year and a half prior and ended up victimized by sex trafficking. After months of little communication, we successfully convinced this 16-year-old girl to return into the foster care system. Today, she is no longer a victim of sex trafficking, and after having never attended high school, she entered an individualized education program that allowed her to work on her educational goals. A couple of months after being assigned to this case, there were a few hiccups involving the youngest child. As a CASA volunteer, I followed this child through four foster homes, over the course of two weeks, after she was abruptly removed from what had been her foster home for two years. This child has been in the system for over 6 years and no one had ever noticed that she was failing every course in school. After months of advocating on her behalf, this young lady entered high school, with plenty of resources to assist her during the school day which hopefully will keep her motivated to graduate. These two teenage girls, along with their teenage brother are now living with someone whom they consider a fictive kin. If all goes well, they will be adopted by the end of this year.

As a CASA volunteer, I have woken up a few hours earlier at times, gone to bed a few hours later, given up many Sundays, and rushed between hearings, meetings and my job on numerous occasions. Looking back on my experiences, what may have been minor inconveniences in my day became large successful strides in the lives of all of these children. Becoming a CASA volunteer has thus far been an exhilarating experience for me. It personally led me to discover a new passion that continues to guide me towards a future in advocacy. Being a CASA volunteer is constantly providing me with humbling experiences that have allowed me to acknowledge how blessed my life truly is. I have grown as an individual and gained a strength and compassion that I never knew I had. I have also come to the realization that as a CASA volunteer, I have changed more than the lives of these children I have encountered, I have changed my own.

If you or anyone you know would like to become a CASA volunteer, please visit casalovevegas.org for further information or call (702) 455-4306.