

Three Generations of CASA Volunteers

This is a story about the educational journey of Amanda Bittola, Advocate Supervisor at Child Advocacy Services that has turned into a labor of love for an entire family. It all started when Amanda became a CASA volunteer after learning about the program in her social work class at Southeastern. She felt that this was such an eye opening experience that all these things are happening where you live and you never knew about it. She learned that more and more kids are coming into care every day, which is why she tells everyone to become a CASA volunteer. After serving as a volunteer, she had an opportunity to intern at CAS in the fall semester of 2016. She was offered an Advocate Supervisor position in the Hammond office in April of 2017.

Jennifer Blessey, Amanda's mother, had known about CASA for a while and was always something she wanted to do when she became an "empty nester". She feels that her CASA kids know that she is there for them with no hidden agenda and always ends a visit asking if she can come visit again. Jennifer has found that she loves being a CASA, loves her CASA kids, and getting to see them.

Robert (Bob) "Doc" Goodwin, Amanda's grandfather, was so happy when Amanda got the job she wanted. When Jennifer mentioned volunteering, he thought that this was something important that he wanted to do. He had worked with kids all his life and wondered what happened to them to make them how they are. Since he was retired and didn't have much to do, he decided to volunteer, too. Jennifer and Doc attended the CASA training together in August of 2017. Doc thought that everyone would be young, meaning that he thought other volunteers would be younger than him, but found that volunteers were of all ages. When Doc was assigned his first case, he knew it would take a long time to build a relationship with his CASA child and a once a month visit wouldn't cut it, so he visited him once a week. The child had been moved around a lot and let down by many adults in his life. Therefore, Doc had to make sure the child knew he could count on him and establish that trust. He found that meeting with teachers, parents, etc. gave him a good perspective on what the child was going through. Doc visited him for two months where the child didn't say a word before he eventually opened up and started talking. He discovered that his CASA child was a very intelligent boy, knew how to play chess, and reading became a part of their visit. After that, they started planning their future visits. When he couldn't meet with his child, he would send him pictures they took together and write him a letter. The child's therapist told him that the child had started opening up more in their sessions since starting meeting with Doc and it has been a complete breakthrough. Doc is currently on a break because of surgery but feels that being a CASA volunteer is a very rewarding experience. He states that more retired people need to consider being a CASA because it is a fun and heart-warming experience.

Amanda later recruited her sister, Kelsey, who did not think she would have time but went through with the training anyway in May of 2018. Kelsey is currently on a case and figured out a way to make it work with her supervisor's help. She thought that the experience was an eye-opener for younger people who have lived a sheltered life. She

says, "It is scary how horrible people are. When I did my first visit, the kids were worried I was going to take them away. I went back to visit later in the week to tell them that I was there for them and not going to take them away."

Jennifer, Doc, and Kelsey have all found that the available time they have to volunteer is very different. Jennifer and Kelsey have found that they only have a little time. Doc, on the other hand, has a lot of time to devote since his retirement. Collectively, this family has served 10 children.

When asked about any advice they would give:

"Training seems overwhelming, but once you get a case it all clicks. The training is great knowledge to have and the cultural differences that you learn about in training are important." Jennifer Blessey.

"The experience opens up your hearts and your eyes and you see more and you feel more. It opens up your minds and you gain a better understanding of people. We see the problems but we don't see them with our hearts and our eyes. Once you start doing this, your hearts are warmed and eyes are opened." Doc Goodwin.

"If you don't think you have enough time, you'll make time and it will work out. Training is a lot, but it is worth it." Kelsey Bittola.