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THE UNIQUE ROLE OF A CASA

by Amanda Kasper

I am a CASA advocate. I was assigned to a family with two children in resource care. For nearly five and a half years, I've visited my kids in different environments—in each of their resource care homes, at daycare, at school, and in supervised visits with their birth mother. I've witnessed their milestones, begun to understand the long-term impact of the physical abuse they both received before they were removed from their original home, and tried to learn how exactly I can help. I've been lucky enough to witness the incredible resilience of children. These little kids—they've faced more challenges in their short lives than most young adults I know. And the hardest thing is, they don't realize their lives have been any different than anyone else's.

As a CASA volunteer, my primary role is to observe. It is to offer a full report to the juvenile court judge every few months about where my kids are, how they are, and how we can help. I have the ability to make requests, to report unfortunate facts, to provide the entire picture. By seeing my kids once every few weeks, I get a pretty good idea of where they're at—and what they need. They're too young to tell anyone that they need winter clothes or immunizations at the doctor's office; that they're having trouble seeing the board at school or that they're being emotionally neglected at home. They're too young to report the challenges in their days, their fears, their dreams.

That's my job. I'm too young to become a resource parent and I don't have the resources to open a children's shelter—but right now, today, this is what I can do. I can do my best to understand the things that can't be said. I can see these things, and I can shed light on them. I can get the information to the people that need it.

I visit my kids as often as possible, so I can tell the judge as much about their lives as I can. I visit my kids, because it's quite possible that I am the only person in their lives that has the time and energy to report on them constantly. I visit my kids because quickly, they became just that—MY kids. I spend time with these kids because there's too much they can't say. There's too much they can't tell anyone, there's too much nobody looks closely enough to see. That's my job. That's how I know I'm making a difference. I'm learning how to hear the things that cannot be said. And being a CASA volunteer, fulfilling this role, well, it's something I can't imagine my life without.

After five and a half years, we've arrived at the best possible outcome for my kids, and we've been standing here long enough to know that it's a stable solution. I look upon this change with mixed feelings, but mostly with gratitude. These kids, this family, they've changed my life. They've made me believe that with the right support, resources, time, and intentions, people can change. They've taught me that there is always, always, always a chance to start over again. Most importantly, they've taught me the power of words, in a context unlike anything else.

I believe in you.
I'm here for you.
You can trust me.
How can I help?

Simple phrases. Words we take for granted are things that can change someone, inside and out. They are things that aren't said, or worse, aren't meant. Things that can't be believed. Words have the power to fill us up, to raise us up, to point us in the right direction—or to leave us bare and empty, feeling small and alone. The experience of working with these children: the hope I've been able to offer and the knowledge I've gained, has been incredible. It's been an honor and a privilege to care about them and support them, to advocate for them, to hold their hands.



COMMUNITY HOPE



CASA is looking for a few good humans.

Have you been wondering what we do here at CASA? It is simple. We train, empower and inspire volunteer advocates (CASAs) to improve the lives of abused and neglected children, by walking beside them and serving as their voice in court. Although it is simple to say... It is actually not that simple.

First, we focus on outreach to get people interested in supporting, donating and volunteering. Then we screen and train the people who agree to do this tough, but rewarding volunteer work. We coach, support and continue to train them as they walk alongside their appointed child or children. We bond with, laugh, cry, and celebrate with our CASAs. Our volunteers become family and we work together to improve the lives of every child we advocate for.

We also provide resources for children and their families, such as clothing, shoes, books, school supplies and much more. We collaborate with attorneys, child welfare caseworkers, the courts and many others, all in an effort to gain the best possible outcomes for each child. Often, CASAs are the only person informing the court about the child's specific needs.

I am guessing you know by now that this is not a simple volunteer position, but if you want to truly make a difference, being a CASA could be for you. Our organization has made a difference for tens of thousands of local children since opening in 1990, all because of the over one thousand volunteers who answered the call.

Our next training begins in early June. If you have an interest in learning more about becoming a CASA, or would like an opportunity to ask questions, simply attend a weekly virtual orientation by emailing CASA@jacksoncountycasa.org. With over 200 children on our wait list, we need you!

"There was a time in my life where I couldn't see myself in the future, I couldn't imagine a future with me here. I couldn't see myself even graduating or making it past the age of 18. I'm not sure I would be here to this day and where I'm at in life if it wasn't for my amazing CASA and the CASA office."

Former CASA youth

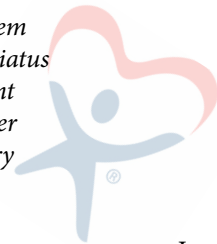
J Mylenek

Jennifer Mylenek,
Executive Director and Child Advocate



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CHILD ABUSE PREVENTION MONTH



Keeping children safe by supporting families and reporting suspected abuse or neglect is everyone's responsibility. This call to action is not just for families and those who work on behalf of children; rather, it is the sounding of an alarm to the mail carrier, delivery person, grocery store clerk, pastor, drug store cashier, teacher, and next-door neighbor. Join us in keeping a safe, watchful eye on our children.



National Child Abuse Hotline:
1-800-422-4453

www.childhelp.org

#EyesOnChildren



VOLUNTEER APPRECIATION WEEK

APRIL 16-22, 2023



For your dedication to abused and neglected children in our community
For your innovative approach to serving in uncertain times
For your compassion and consistent presence in the lives of others

Thank you, CASA Volunteers.
You are our heroes.



COMMUNITY SERVICE AWARD

Recognizing CASA Laura Wilson



On March 29, 2023, longtime CASA, Laura Wilson, received the Jackson County Community Service Award. Laura is a court appointed child advocate for children under the jurisdiction of the dependency court in Jackson County. She is a voice for the children she serves. Currently, she has three difficult cases with medically fragile children, all under the age of two. She advocates for the needs of these children by visiting them monthly, speaking to their attorneys, caregivers, doctors, caseworkers, parents, resource parents, etc, to advocate for their best interest in court.

She is also a Peer Coach for other CASAs, guiding them with court report writing, attending hearings, child visits, making sure children get the services they need, and helping fellow CASAs advocate for children in court.

Laura's heartfelt and dedicated efforts have eased a community problem by keeping local children in safe and permanent homes, either back with their parent, if safe, or with a resource parent or relative. Advocating for children in child welfare and being a voice for them in court has shown that children are 98% less likely to experience re-abuse, and 50% less likely to languish in resource care. They also receive needed services more often when a CASA is on their case.

Laura has always gone above and beyond for her CASA children and for her CASA mentees. She volunteers to be part of our training of new CASAs and training of Peer Coaches. She has a critical role in the success of our fundraisers, volunteering her time and service to help organize these events. Laura is a huge part of our close CASA family.

THE EASTER BUNNY VISITS CASA

With the help of nine-year-old, Jack Baker, the Easter Bunny has 182 Easter Baskets to deliver to CASA children. When choosing his community project to earn his charity patch for the Black Belt Excellence Achievement Program at Premier Martial Arts, Jack was concerned the Easter Bunny would not be able to find CASA children in their local Resource Care homes. He began raising funds, contacting family, friends and collecting bottles and cans to deposit. Jack raised a total of \$2,633 to create the Easter bags. A few local businesses, including Dairy Queen and MOD Pizza, also donated gift cards and goods for his project.

When asked about his project, Jack said, "I am happy I am doing this because it is for a good cause. I am really proud of myself for how much money I have raised. I raised \$2,633 and I was able to make 182 Easter bags, which is over five times my original goal because my original goal was \$500. I hope that me being able to help the Easter bunny this year makes a lot of kids happy."

"Jack's thoughtfulness, generosity and hard work to collect funds, choose items and assemble these baskets is completely selfless and very admirable," says Jennifer Mylenek, Executive Director of CASA of Jackson and Josephine Counties. "We want him to know he has helped to make a lot of children and youth feel valued and loved."

