

## Every Child's Right

CASA volunteers advocate for abused and neglected kids • By Nina Bunker Ruiz

**Imagine a 4-year-old child** — who still has the chubby knuckles with the little dimples, loves to be pushed on a swing, doesn't notice or care that her shoes are on the wrong feet, and is caught in the throes of a court case involving domestic violence, child neglect and drug abuse.

The attorneys make their cases, the social worker reports on the progress of the child and the parents, and everyone awaits the judge's ruling. The chances that this little person will land in a safe place are much better if the child has a CASA volunteer — a Court Appointed Special Advocate.

When a child finds him or herself in the court system because of abuse or neglect, what he or she usually needs most is an objective, caring adult — someone who will become familiar with the child's history and advocate for the child's best interests in court.

CASA, First Judicial District, recruits, trains and supports volunteers to do this work. National CASA, a nationwide nonprofit organization, came to Santa Fe in 1995 and has helped 150 to 200 children annually in Santa Fe, Rio Arriba and Los Alamos counties for the past 16 years. The crew is made up of three paid staff and approximately 60 volunteers.

"We are unique," says Janice B. Quinn, executive director for CASA, First Judicial District. "No one else is allowed this kind of access to these children — aside from the lawyers and social workers, who are overburdened with large caseloads as it is. A CASA volunteer usually has only one case."

A CASA volunteer monitors the child's case and well-being, facilitates communication and gets to know all the people in the child's life — family members, teachers, social workers and lawyers, Quinn explains. Using the information they glean about the family's strengths, the volunteer speaks up for the child in court and submits written reports that advocate for the child's best interests. The volunteer's involvement ensures that the process remains child-centered and that decisions are reached that make sense for the health of the child.

Having one adult to guard the child's best interest through the entire case can make a huge difference in that child's future, shortening the time that the child is in foster care and reducing the chances that the child will return to a traumatic home environment.

"The judge really listens to and relies on the insight a CASA volunteer brings to the case," Quinn said.

CASA's extensive, rigorous training ensures that volunteers have the tools they need to respond appropriately to a child's needs, physiologically, emotionally and culturally. CASA volunteers require 30 hours of training, including courtroom observation, before being appointed by a judge to the case of an abused or



Lauren Huichan, age 22, and her CASA volunteer and friend Betsy Model. Photo by Jackie Mathey

neglected foster child in the court system.

"We have intensive in-service trainings," Quinn explains, "to help our volunteers understand the impact of abuse and neglect on young brains. Our CASA volunteers need to be savvy, and each case is unique."

Work at CASA can be an emotional rollercoaster for her and her volunteers, Quinn admits. "Everything seems to be going really well, then the child's behavior regresses, mom falls off the wagon, or dad disappears." Yet despite the challenging, heart-wrenching work, it's worth it. "We need a new word for 'volunteer.' It's the toughest job in town, but our volunteers love their work. And I love to see the light in volunteers' eyes when they see they can make a difference. I love to see their commitment, their outrage and their passion. I love seeing that these incredible advocates have an outlet for their passion and their strengths."

The program's high retention rate speaks to this commitment and passion; most volunteers stick around at least five years, some for much longer. One volunteer is celebrating her 16<sup>th</sup> year with the program.

Lauren Huichan, now 22, lived in 22 settings during her five years in the foster care system. After being removed from the care of an abusive mother, she lived

in shelters, group homes, foster homes and residential treatment facilities, often wondering where she would be sleeping the next day. Today she has a support team that includes CASA volunteer Betsy Model, who points out that her role is to empower Lauren, not mentor her: "I see Lauren and me as a team," Model says, "as a partnership. We work together to help Lauren figure out what makes her happy and what a path might look like towards the future that she wants."

Lauren says: "Betsy motivates me. She helps me get through tough times. She doesn't judge me. She's just there to support me, no matter what. I never really had someone like that before."

Since many of the challenges and tragedies that CASA's children deal with are generational — poverty, grief, trauma, drug abuse, child abuse and neglect — Quinn and staff have looked for ways to make an impact sooner. "One way we try to meet this need is our Power Up Transitioning Youth program, for the teens who are aging out of the foster care system." She feels that teens need continued support engaging in their future in a positive way, not only for their own sake, but also for the sake of their children. "How can we expect these teens to succeed if they can't connect to an adult and a community?"

CASA launched a pilot in January, through grant funding, to work with teens on probation in Santa Fe County. Court-appointed mentors help teens "get a vision for their future," Quinn explains, "to help prevent them from heading down the prison pathway. But it takes teamwork with all the professionals involved. We are hoping we will get funding for a full year for this project. At its heart, this is about ensuring that every child has the right to learn and grow, and be treated with dignity and respect in a loving family," she adds.

Are you interested in working with CASA, First Judicial District? Volunteers are particularly needed to mentor teens. CASA has lost 20 percent of its funding over the last two years, so donations are always welcome. CASA welcomes opportunities to speak to groups, recognizing that opportunities for education and outreach keep the community abreast of the challenges abused children face.

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*To learn more about CASA outreach or to make a donation, contact Quinn at 820-1500, or go to [www.CASAFirst.org](http://www.CASAFirst.org). For more information on volunteering, contact Carol Chavez Hunt at 820-1500. Got a Noisy Acorn? This column promotes community events, legislative actions or fundraising efforts for children too young to make political noise on their own. Call 984-3171 or e-mail [info@stumbleweeds.com](mailto:info@stumbleweeds.com).*