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Jewelers Help CASA, First Judicial District Protect Precious Gems: Our County's Children

When Michael's mother left town, she left him behind. He was 13 and alone in the world when he entered foster care. Alone, that is, until a judge assigned Michael a court-appointed special advocate, or CASA volunteer. Having a caring adult advocate in his life made a powerful difference for Michael.

CASA volunteers are appointed by judges to represent the best interests of young people who have been removed from their homes due to abuse or neglect. CASA, First Judicial District is dedicated to getting abused and neglected children out of the foster care system and into safe, permanent homes. Last year, 55 CASA volunteers spoke out on behalf of 102 children and youth in Santa Fe, Rio Arriba and Los Alamos counties.

Michael's CASA volunteer, Joe, knew that the social services department had been unable to locate the boy's father. But the department had thousands of children to worry about, and Joe had only one. He did some independent investigating and found Michael's father living in another state. Working with Michael's state caseworker, Joe helped arrange a phone call between Michael and his father, who was overjoyed to hear from his son and ready to parent.

Last Valentine's Day Michael was facing five years in "the system" and the grim prospect of aging out alone. This year, he is celebrating love in his new home – and getting to know his father. But without a CASA volunteer, their story would have a very different ending.

Jewelers have a heart for kids

Since 2003, Jewelers for Children (JFC), the industry organization of jewelry retailers, manufacturers, watch companies and trade associations, has been the leading private supporter of the National CASA Association and its network of nearly 1,000 community-based CASA programs. CASA, First Judicial District is one of those programs receiving a grant of \$27,500 to provide direct advocacy services to abused and neglected children right here in Santa Fe, Rio Arriba and Los Alamos counties.

"Children often bear the brunt of tough economic times," says JFC Chairman Ed Bridge. "As families experience greater stress due to financial pressures, children in at-risk families are more likely to be victimized. That is why we remain committed to helping fund the work of community CASA programs like CASA, First Judicial District."

To learn more about CASA, First Judicial District visit www.CASAFirst.org.

[To protect the privacy of children and families, this story was edited to change names and remove details that might identify a specific child.]