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Advocating for More Than 30 Children A Court Appointed Special Advocate Shares Her Journey

PHOENIX – Nationwide there are over 400,000 children in foster care. The Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) program is a nationwide organization with 939 state organizations and local programs in 49 states, encompassing over 95,000 volunteers serving around 240,000 children annually. In Arizona, there are about 11,000 children in foster care.

Susan Ward, a volunteer in Gila County shares her journey of being a CASA volunteer across two states while advocating for over 30 children in the foster care system over the years.

I had the privilege of being a stay-at-home mom which enabled me to volunteer regularly in my children's classrooms, but as they moved into High School, I looked for another way to serve in my community. My husband was speaking with a co-worker who told him about the CASA program. I looked up our county program in Washington State where I was living at the time and became a CASA in 2007. I wanted to continue to work with children and after learning about the critical support a CASA provides to a foster child, I began my service as a CASA.

I became a CASA in 2008 and in 2014 took a leave until one of my cases came back into the system in 2016 and I returned to support these children. I continued as a Pierce County CASA in Washington State until we moved to Arizona. It was an easy decision to continue volunteering when I came to Arizona because being a CASA is the most rewarding and humbling experience I have had in my life. I have been a CASA with Gila County since 2022, and in my total time volunteering I have served over 30 children.

Children who come into the foster care system need an advocate. They are afraid, unsure of what is happening and often are alone coming out of abusive, neglectful, and traumatic circumstances. As a CASA, we advocate for them in court, at their school, with their foster placement, and biological family until the child can be safely reunited back home or are adopted. We try to make certain that our kiddos can have as normal a life as possible. We work with community groups to provide needed clothing, beds, sports equipment and fees, school supplies, anything a child needs. We also work within the school to make certain that all their educational needs are met. You truly make a difference in a child's life.

My longest and most memorable case lasted about five years. My little guy came into care when he was about five years old. His mother could not care for him and was willing to give him up for adoption and there were no other family members. He was placed in a pre-adoptive home which sadly disrupted due to a technicality, and he was put into a foster home. This was devastating for him. Over the next five years I would meet with him a couple of times each month at his foster home, visit him at school and meet for lunch. I also met with his teachers and school counselors to make sure his educational needs were being met. He was alone as he moved from foster home to foster home as well as two other pre-adopt homes. When his last pre-adopt foster home brought him back after

deciding the adoption was not going to work, I was asked to be there for him as I was the only consistent person he has had in his life. This was unimaginable pain and disappointment for this child. I knew I had to help find his forever family soon. I thought back to his first adoptive family and began working with the social worker to see if they were still in the community. They were and had worked out those technicalities. We reached out to the family who said they never stopped thinking about him and would joyfully welcome him back into their family and adopt him. The picture of him returning home and his adoption day is forever etched in my mind. Most often our kiddos come into care alone. Their CASA is the one consistent reliable person in their life.

The most rewarding part about being a CASA is seeing a child's eyes light up when you arrive or seeing them come out of foster care and hearing from them years later. And the most challenging part about being a CASA is seeing the trauma these children have suffered. It does however drive you to do all you can to advocate for your kiddos. Being a CASA has opened my eyes to the world of drug addiction, mental illness, domestic violence, homelessness, and the tragic impact it has on innocent children. I feel it has made me more compassionate and aware of the struggles facing so many families in our community.

There is an additional need for volunteers because there are foster children who need someone to care and to advocate for them. The time you volunteer can make such a difference in a child's life. A CASA also plays a critical role in the courtroom. You likely see and interact with your child more than anyone else involved in the case. On many occasions the Judge will look to the CASA for deeper insight into the child's wants and needs.

The CASA program is very well-organized and continually prepares you to meet the needs of foster children. They have outstanding supervisors to support you, CASA support groups that meet to talk about experiences and how to handle all sorts of situations, and training that covers everything from how to write court reports to how to meet your kiddo for the first time. They are dedicated to serving the needs of foster children and youth.

I would encourage anyone who wishes to volunteer and make a difference in a child's life to contact their local CASA program and see if it is a good fit. There is a commitment as a CASA to be there for a child until they are successfully moved out of foster care. It takes about 12-15 hours a month as well as time for ongoing training throughout the year. All time well spent!

In Arizona, there is a program in each of the 15 counties. CASA volunteers do not need any prior special training and come from all walks of life. Anyone 21 years of age or older, who can pass a thorough background check and complete 30 hours of training, is encouraged to apply. To learn more about becoming a CASA volunteer and to find your local program visit, AZCASAVolunteer.org.

Another way to get involved is a program with similar requirements called the Foster Care Review Board (FCRB) in which volunteers are appointed by the court to a 5-member panel that meets virtually one weekday per month to review the cases of children in foster care. To learn more, go to azcourts/FCRB.

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