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CASA advocates for foster children

BY JAMES LOTTS

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Every year, thousands of children end up in the foster system due to abuse, neglect or abandonment. The foster care system can be difficult for children and can leave them feeling alone in their situation, but Voices for Children's Riverside County CASA program is working to change that.

CASA stands for Court Appointed Special Advocate. CASA volunteers are paired with a child

or sibling group. The volunteers learn about the children they are paired with, spend time with them and advocate for their needs to the court.

The program started in Riverside County in 2015. President and CEO of Voices for Children, Jessica Muñoz, said she takes great pride in being a part of a community that cares so much about helping vulnerable youth.

"(We take) an immense of pride. And I think, for me, the feelings of

pride that I have are not just in our work at Voices for Children, which of course I'm very proud of. But I'm also proud to be a part of a community where people will choose to volunteer, become a CASA and serve in this role because ultimately, we only serve children because wonderful members of the community have stepped up to volunteer."

Muñoz joined Voices for Children in 2016 with a background in juvenile law.

When she was practicing law in San Diego County, she said CASA volunteers were great to work with and she appreciated their work, so when the CASA program expanded into Riverside County, she wanted to join the organization.

"When I was practicing in that county, I had CASAs from Voices for Children on my cases and I always really appreciated what they contributed to the child's life, as well as to the information available for the judge to make decisions," she said.

CASAs play an important role in the court system. Once volunteers are accepted and complete "Advocate University," a 35-hour training course, they are sworn in by a Superior Court judge and are considered "officers of the court."

Once assigned a child or sibling group, the CASA will work with their caretakers, social workers, attorneys, teachers, and doctors to ensure they receive the care and attention they need. CASAs are also assigned an advocacy supervisor who can help them throughout their assignment.

Every three to six months, CASAs write a report to the judge presiding over their child's case, updating them about the child and recommending the best course of action for them based on their situation.

Muñoz said many volunteers have said they get more out of the experience than children do. She said it's a testament to how much they care about being a CASA.

"In many ways that speaks to just the huge heart that our volunteers have that these are people who find deep and profound satisfaction in having the opportunity to be there for another person, and particularly a child," she said.

Calimesa resident Linda Preston became a CASA after learning about the program through a friend. Since 2022, she has been assigned two cases, a 13-year-old boy and a sibling group, a 3- and 7-year-old.



CASAs advocate for abused, neglected or abandoned children in the court system by speaking on their behalf and making sure their needs are met. (Voices for Children/Submitted)

Preston has enjoyed her time volunteering and thinks it's important for children in these situations to have positive role models.

"It's important to me to make a difference," Preston said.

She wasn't sure if the 13-year-old boy would be receptive to spending time with her, but he quickly began to enjoy it because it gave him a way to escape his situation. He was in a group home at the time.

Volunteers are required to visit their assigned child at least once a month, but it turned into multiple for Preston and the boy.

"I didn't know which way it would go with him, like if he wouldn't really care, but after a while, he just looked forward to our visit," Preston said. "We have to visit once a month. I would visit him every other week because I knew he wanted to get away from the group home and he wanted to go out and have fun. And that's what we would do."

Preston would take him and do what he wanted to do, such as fishing. The boy eventually began living with his father. He went from being a failing student while in foster care to passing with flying colors.

Despite not being the boy's CASA anymore, Preston still visits him. She said she formed a friendship with him that will last.

"We did (form a friendship). It is very important to me because he has a place in my heart and he always will," Preston said.

Preston takes pride in being one of the few constants in these children's lives. Preston has encouraged friends of hers to join the program when they retire, and she

thinks anyone who can volunteer should do it.

"I think anybody who had the time to do it should try and help a child out there because, like I said, we're the only constant in their life," she said. "The boy I had, he changed homes while I was with him, he changed attorneys, he changed social workers and it's hard. They just start all over with these strangers. And yet, I was the one that was with him the whole time, so it just makes a difference in their life."

According to Voices for Children, children with CASAs are more likely to be adopted and less likely to re-enter the child welfare system.

Muñoz said she is "excited and grateful" to have helped so many vulnerable children in the foster system since the program began in Riverside County. But she acknowledged that with an estimated 5,000 children will spend time in Riverside County foster care this year, there will always be more in need of a CASA.

"As excited as we are to have served as many kids as we have, there's so many more children in foster care that don't have a CASA. So it's kind of both sides of the coin for me," Muñoz said. "It's being very, very happy and pleased with where we are but also wanting to remain very committed to making sure that we can serve Banning and the Pass and Riverside County as a whole as deeply and completely as possible."

People interested in volunteering or finding more information about Voices for Children's Riverside County CASA program, can go to speakupnow.org. ■

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