



image credit: Courtesy of Kathy Kerr

“If I can sit down for freedom, you can stand up for children.” —Rosa Parks

STANDING UP, NOT STANDING BY

By Kathy Kerr

You’ve seen our kids on the news—victims of horrific physical, emotional, and sexual abuse—these are CASA kids.

“Infant Hospitalized Due to Injuries Caused by Mother”

“Stepfather Arrested and charged with Sexually Abusing Young Stepdaughter”

Every day in this country, 1,900 children become victims of abuse and neglect, and four of them will die. Due to abuse and neglect, these innocent children often are removed from their homes and have their lives turned upside down.

One of the country’s leading child advocacy organizations, Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) for Children, is seeking passionate volunteers to give a voice to those most vulnerable as they wade through the overburdened legal and child welfare system. CASA trains community volunteers to become Guardians ad Litem or “GALs,” who act as sworn officers of the court to monitor each child’s case, serving the singular purpose of advocating for the child’s best interest. **The system focuses on the family. The GAL focuses only on the child’s best interest.**

Too many children are forced to go through the chaos of moving through the child protection system alone. We need a call to action for volunteers to step up and be a voice for the children who so desperately need them. Community volunteers are thoroughly trained and well supported in their advocacy role for children.

Volunteers come from all walks of life—they do not need to be lawyers or social workers. Our children most often come from underserved populations and in equal numbers male and female, so having a diverse population of volunteers who can genuinely empathize with these children is invaluable.

CASA specially screens its volunteers and provides them with the requisite knowledge and skills training. This includes training in the legal system, case/project management, interviewing and analysis, cultural awareness, investigation, effective communication, child and family development, conflict management, and mental health and substance abuse awareness.

Once assigned to a case, the GAL visits the child in the child’s home at least monthly, and talks with his/her teachers, doctors, and others who are close to the child. The GAL then provides a brief report of findings to the court, and when the case goes before the judge, the GAL serves firsthand as the child’s voice, answering questions and making fact-based recommendations. **It is a wonderful opportunity to gain experience and interact with judges, attorneys, social workers, and other professionals while helping a child find the safest place to grow.**



image credit: Courtesy of Kathy Kerr

The CASA volunteer is often the only consistent, caring adult involved from beginning to end in a child’s case in juvenile court. Many children subject to abuse and neglect are removed from their homes and placed into foster care, often far from their friends, families, and school. The CASA volunteer works to ensure that the child’s stay in foster care is no longer than necessary, and that the child is placed in a safe, loving, permanent home where healing can begin.

Research shows that children who experience the positive CASA/GAL relationship are more likely to succeed in school and less likely to get into trouble, abuse illegal substances, or commit child abuse or family violence as adults. **CASAs give children hope, love and a chance to grow up.** Yvette McGee Brown, former Ohio Supreme Court Justice, has said



“The 9-year-old you ignore today will be the 15-year-old with a 9 millimeter in your back tomorrow.”

Volunteers are desperately needed in communities

across the country. Less than five hours a month will change the life of a neglected and abused child and will certainly enrich yours. A child is waiting.

About National CASA: Giving abused and neglected children a voice in the juvenile court system when they need it most... when they have no voice of their own.

CASA for Children is a network of 933 community-based programs that recruit, train, and support citizen-volunteers to advocate for the best interests of abused and neglected children in courtrooms and communities. Volunteer advocate GALs, empowered directly by the courts, offer judges the critical information they need to ensure that each child’s rights and needs are being attended to while in foster care. Volunteers monitor children until they are placed in loving, permanent homes. To learn more about CASA and to find a CASA organization close to you, visit www.casaforchildren.org.



image credit: Courtesy of Kathy Kerr

Kathy Kerr is the executive director of CASA of Franklin County located in Columbus, Ohio. CASA is a nonprofit organization that served 831 abused and neglected children last year, and has 249 volunteer GALs. Kerr worked in government and politics for 27 years before following her passion to serve children and found her ‘voice’ at CASA. To learn more, visit www.casacolumbus.org.