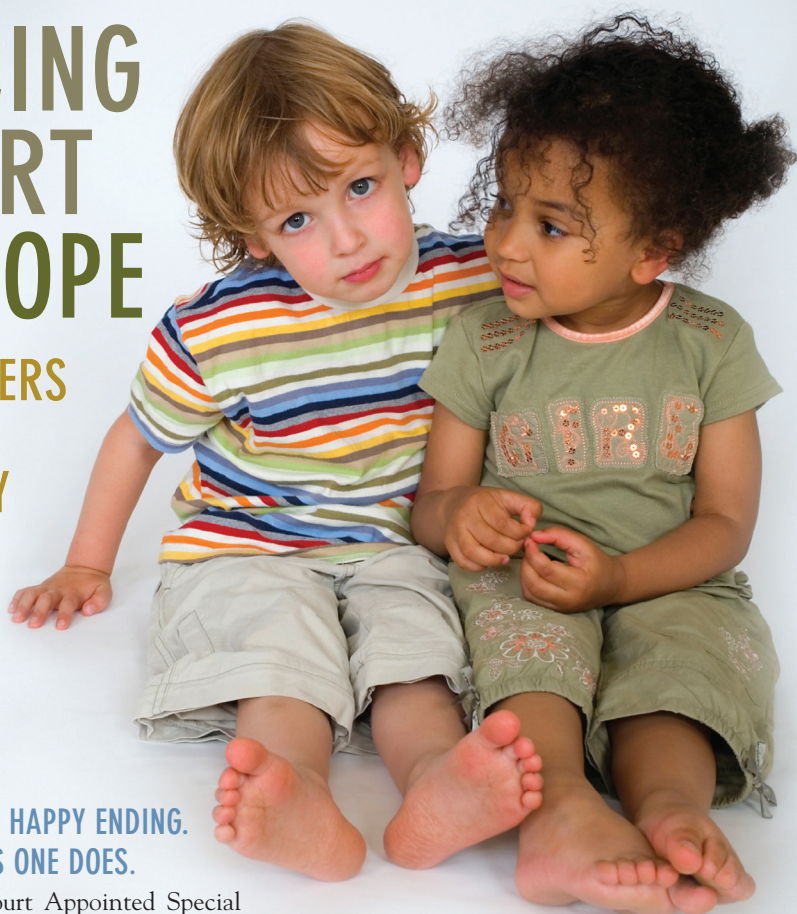


REPLACING THE HURT WITH HOPE

CASA VOLUNTEERS CHANGE LIVES. ARE YOU READY TO DO THAT?

By Toni Garrard Clay



NOT ALL STORIES HAVE A HAPPY ENDING. BUT REST ASSURED, THIS ONE DOES.

Almost three years ago, Court Appointed Special Advocate Elvis Allen was assigned to the case of a three-month-old boy. “When I held him,” recalled Allen, “I thought, ‘Oh, God. He’s going to be in a wheelchair the rest of his life.’” The infant’s face was distorted due to a skull fracture and three bleeding concussions. He had fractured legs, ribs and arms.

After Child Protective Services removed the boy from his home, a judge appointed Allen as his advocate throughout the legal process, however long that might take. As it turned out, it was nearly three years.

“No one in his family ever told me who did that to him,” said Allen. “So I advised the judge that he should never go back to any of them. His mom and dad voluntarily relinquished their rights, and I watched his foster family do miracles with him, physically and emotionally.”

A few weeks ago, that once-battered infant ran joyfully around the courthouse — “the most beautiful kid you’ve ever seen in your life” — as his foster parents officially adopted him. “He’s safe; he’s loved; his

family is amazing. When that happens,” said Allen, “it makes everything worthwhile.”

Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) of Trinity Valley covers three counties: Henderson, Anderson and Cherokee. Three full-time and five part-time employees oversee 105 volunteers who advocate for 100 percent of the foster children in those counties. In Henderson County last year, 55 volunteers advocated for around 250 kids. In addition to being an advocate, Allen works part time as the resource development officer for all three counties. Lee Ann Millender serves as executive director.

Of the 80 or so CASA agencies throughout Texas, CASA of Trinity Valley is one of only seven that oversees 100 percent of the foster children in its region. The national average is about 20 percent coverage for foster children because the volunteer force is insufficient.



“We usually oversee about five kids at a time to make sure everyone has an advocate,” said Allen. “We’d like to have 20 more volunteers for Henderson County. That would be a boon for us.”

A court appointed special advocate acts as the eyes and ears of the judge. When a child enters into the judicial process, he or she is appointed an attorney and a CPS representative. “Those people are working on the side of the law,” said Allen. “Our charge is purely the best interest of the child, whatever that may look like.”

A CASA volunteer is provided with support, guidance, tools and training to act as an officer of the court within the child welfare system. Advocates interview family members and others involved with the child’s situation; they look for relatives who might be able and willing to provide a loving home; they attend any related hearings and meetings and check the foster home the child is assigned to.

“It takes about a year for a child to get through the system, and we’re usually the only consistent person that child sees throughout the process,” explained Allen. “We report to the judge directly as to what

we believe is in the best interest of the child in the long run. We try to work closely with CPS, but we don’t work for them, and we may disagree in front of the bench about what is best for that child. When that happens, the judge has to sort it out and make a decision.”

The CASA program is unique in that it uses “everyday citizens” who serve as appointed members of the court, usually logging 15 to 20 hours a month. A court appointed special advocate is typically someone who has compassion for children, an interest in doing investigative work, the ability to be objective and a good measure of internal fortitude. “We don’t always get our way, and we see some hard things,” said Allen. “You’ve got to be able to manage that.”

While everyone interested in volunteering is strongly encouraged to apply, there is a particular need for Spanish speaking advocates as well as more men, due to the fact that so many children lack a male role model in their lives.

For more information and to apply to become an advocate, visit casaoftv.org or call 903-675-7070.

