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FALL 2008 TRAINING BEGINS IN SEPTEMBER

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This spring I had the honor of receiving the John L. Snook Child Advocacy Award from Children Youth and Family Services. When I considered what to say in accepting the award, two thoughts stood out above all else in my mind and in my heart. First and foremost, I feel tremendous gratitude and respect for the volunteers from this community who make up the heart and soul of Piedmont CASA.

Since 1995, my work as Executive Director has focused on building the best program possible to train and support the efforts of men and women of all ages and backgrounds who give their time and their compassion to children caught in a maze of serious family problems. During the past 13 years, Piedmont CASA has trained over 400 volunteers to advocate for local children who have been abused or neglected by their caregivers. Without the dedication of these volunteers and the dedication of the staff who guide them throughout their work, Piedmont CASA would not exist and, as the judges we report to agree, the children before their courts would lose their most powerful voice.

My second thought brought me straight to the experience many years ago of having a foster child in my own home, and my deep belief that the system should have done more for him, which led me to devote my career to Piedmont CASA. Several years ago Lloyd Snook, who presented me with the Child Advocacy Award, shared with me the experience of a capital murder trial in which the death penalty was sought. One co-defendant was the foster child who had lived for one year with my family when he was a teenager. Clearly, after he went home, things did not go well for him. As a young man, he became involved in drugs, which led to his involvement in criminal activity and ultimately to his responsibility for the death of another man.

My former foster child, now in his twenties, will be incarcerated for the rest of his life. His life is a tragedy that he does not want repeated. And so, from prison, he writes to his young daughter and tells her that she is smart and beautiful and that he loves her. He attempts to be for her the father he never knew; he knows that without support and love she will never develop the foundation each one of us needs to succeed, indeed to survive.

I believe in CASA’s advocacy for abused and neglected children because I do believe that there is hope for everyone. At the sentencing hearing for my former foster child, Lloyd Snook said, “each one of us is better than the worst thing we have ever done.”

I believe that we cannot give up on these children. Abused and neglected children belong to every member of every community. I am proud to direct a CASA program built upon this belief; I am proud to continue to work hard every day, hand in hand with community members who advocate for all our children.
Volunteer Spotlight: Jean Shepard

Approaching Piedmont CASA with a wealth of teaching experience and social commitment, Jean Shepard has found her work as advocate for a teened girl challenging as well as rewarding. Her commitment remains strong and we feel so fortunate to have her support for this program.

“Retirement” from primary school education, after 25 years of multicultural classroom teaching in Hawaii and nine years in the Charlottesville City Schools, remains a relative term for Jean. Always eager to learn more, Jean characterizes her activities during the first three years of her newfound freedom as “expanding my horizons through adult education activities” such as chairing an anti-racism group as a member of the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Unitarian Universalist Church, which led to organizing an excellent, thought-provoking conference in 2007, working with homeless men and women through the PACEM program, and participating in the interdenominational Court Watch program.

In 2005 she felt ready to reconnect with children and chose to devote her considerable energies to CASA. The reasons Jean cited for training to become a child advocate were clear: the memory of former students who showed physical and emotional signs of abuse and a desire for volunteer work that “reaches into the community and beyond my privileged bubble.” Jean joined the spring 2006 training class, where her participation made it a richer learning experience for everyone involved.

That was two years ago. Today, Jean reflects on her work with an angry child who we will call “Mary,” now 16, and a troubled family who told her the first time she met them that they did not need a CASA. Undaunted, Jean proceeded to visit Mary in the Group Home where she had been placed after being removed from the custody of her parents. They went for walks and Jean took her for drives in her car. Jean also spoke at great length to the parents, the social workers assigned to the case, the counselor at the Group Home, the Guardian ad litem representing the child’s best interests, and contacted the child’s therapist and teachers. Jean kept scrupulous notes and has amassed a binder of information that rivals the New York phone book in size.

Teenagers who enter foster care quite often are accustomed to making their own rules and being their own boss; the Court’s authority and the increased structure of their new placement present a difficult transition for them. As a CASA, Jean was part of that system of newly instituted accountability and, as such, was an unwelcome presence. Used to working with young children, Jean found Mary’s reticence and, at times, hostility difficult to penetrate. Over the past two years Jean has cultivated a trusting relationship with Mary by never wavering in her attention and concern for the child, including continuing to faithfully visit her when her behavior deteriorated and she was placed at a facility 60 miles away. One of Jean’s greatest strengths as a CASA, however, has been her ability to accept Mary’s attitude and to recognize that being Mary’s advocate does not necessarily mean being Mary’s friend.

After 18 months in foster care, some of which were quite rocky, Mary returned to her mother’s custody in April. This marks a huge accomplishment for Mary and her family, who have worked hard to change ingrained patterns of behavior. The Juvenile and Domestic Relations Court judge who has heard Mary’s case in its entirety remarked on the insight and understanding of the case expressed in Jean’s court report as well as her ability to speak up for the child’s need for protection and permanency while also recognizing the significant efforts of the parents. Even though this has been tough work, Jean remains committed to staying on the case for several more months, continuing to monitor Mary’s stability and continued success with her hard-won gains.

Other volunteers have expressed reasons similar to Jean’s for volunteering with Piedmont CASA: I have seen children who I perceived to be suffering and I want to help them. I will extend myself into unfamiliar territory to do so. This simple but profound statement carries with it a complex and laudable commitment. Our appreciation and the appreciation of the community abounds.

Thank you, Jean.
A Teen Initiative at Piedmont CASA

The Board of Directors and staff of Piedmont CASA have embarked upon a challenging and important project to provide more effective advocacy for teenagers who have been abused or neglected, and more support and education for the volunteers who advocate for them. Why do we target teens as the object of this increased effort? Research shows that there is a strong likelihood that an abused child will become an abuser, be involved in criminal activity, suffer permanent neurological deficits, exhibit impulsivity, experience significant learning problems, and demonstrate anger control issues. These serious behavioral problems, which result from abuse and neglect suffered at any age, frequently manifest themselves during the teenage years. Academic failure, truancy, running away, anger, low self-esteem, mistrust of adults, pregnancy, drug use and criminal behavior are problems that challenge the teens we serve.

Addressing these problems presents its own challenge. Therapeutically, teenagers are often harder to reach than younger children and their distress has a greater tendency to find expression in behaviors that pose a serious danger to themselves and to others. This tendency is compounded by the fact that children who enter foster care as teenagers have often lived in a dysfunctional environment for many years and have become understandably attached to both their caregivers and their own, often “parentified” role in the family. In addition, teens in foster care can “age-out” of the system without a permanent family, leaving 18 year-olds who suffer from low self-esteem and a keen distrust of adults.

Last year Piedmont CASA closed cases for eight children who had turned 18 while in foster care and were no longer eligible for our services. CASA volunteers voiced serious concerns about the well-being of these children who, on the morning of that magical birthday, were free to leave the foster care system if they chose to. It felt particularly painful for our CASAs to say goodbye to teenagers who had not found permanent homes or formed emotional bonds to stable, caring adults. CASAs report that they continue to worry about these children, now young adults.

Our CASAs’ concerns are not unfounded. Studies have documented that one in four children who turn 18 without a permanent family will be incarcerated within two years of leaving foster care, 1 in 5 will become homeless, only half will graduate from high school, and less than 3 percent will receive college degrees.

As a program, Piedmont CASA remains committed to recruiting, training, and supervising volunteers to better meet the needs of teenagers who have been abused or neglected, with the goal of improving the prognosis for their futures. As an expression of this commitment, the program will expand its capacity by providing on-going training for one Volunteer Supervisor to serve as a “Teen Specialist.” We are very pleased that CASA Supervisor Denise Oinonen has agreed to serve in this newly created position. Her expertise as a social worker specializing in independent living services for teenagers in foster care makes her particularly well-suited to advise Piedmont CASA volunteers on issues of adolescent mental health, identity formation, independent living goals, alternative education and employment options, and the creation of support networks and relationships that substitute for a family structure. This role will allow Denise to conduct more labor-intensive training for volunteers who advocate for teenagers, facilitate “teen focused” case reviews, and direct continuing education in-services on teen issues and the resources available to address them. Denise will attend conferences on topics relevant to teens and identify specialists to consult with CASA volunteers and staff. The CASA program has also committed to modifying the recruitment and application process to both attract and identify volunteers with an interest in working with teens.

Everyone associated with Piedmont CASA looks forward to implementing this exciting initiative, as part of our dedication to providing the most effective advocacy for all abused and neglected children. 

Phoebe Frosch, Advancement Director