

A CHILD HEARD.



**VOICES
• FOR •
CHILDREN**

A LIFE CHANGED.

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2851 MEADOW LARK DRIVE

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www.voices4children.com

Voices for Children

Voices for Children provides advocacy and mentoring services to the foster children of San Diego County.

Our Mission

Voices for Children, a nonprofit organization, endeavors to ensure that abused, neglected and abandoned children who have become dependents of the San Diego County Court will have a safe and permanent home. Through our network of trained and educated volunteer Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASAs), Voices for Children works with key agencies, legal counsel and community resources to identify and protect the best interests of each child inside and outside of court.

Background

Each day innocent children are removed from their homes because their parents have failed to protect and care for them. Through no fault of their own, these abused and neglected children are placed in foster homes or institutions. Thrust into the entanglement of the overburdened Juvenile Court system, these children often endure further emotional trauma as a result of being moved from one temporary home to the next without one constant, caring adult to guide them.

Two people who cared, and dared

Voices for Children was founded in 1980 by Elizabeth Bacon and Kathryn Ashworth, a social worker and law student, who saw first hand how children get lost in the system. Through their involvement with the juvenile dependency system, these two dedicated women realized that a volunteer advocate from the child's perspective could benefit the legal process by presenting the court with helpful insight into the unique circumstances and feelings of each child. Initially, a desk was set up in the Juvenile Court, and the women began recruiting volunteers to review court file cases to monitor the progress of the many young court dependents. In 1982, the Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) program, as it is known today, was introduced to San Diego. Since then, scores of trained volunteers in our community have advocated for the rights of innocent children in San Diego County's overburdened Juvenile Court system.



Members of the National Court Appointed Special Advocate Association

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How the CASA program works

The overarching objective of Voices for Children is to help foster children navigate the time they spend in the system, in order for them to grow up as stable and participating members of the community. The primary way we accomplish this is the CASA program, through which Voices for Children recruits, screens, trains, and supervises volunteers to become CASAs in San Diego County. Assigned to “advocate” for a particular child, each volunteer serves as a fact finder, reviews documents, and interviews the child or children, parents and all parties involved in the case.

The CASA speaks for the child in court, providing objective recommendations to the judge that focus on the child’s best interests. The CASA stands by the child every step of the way, ensuring the child’s case progresses until it is fully resolved and the child is placed in a safe, and permanent home. This may mean returning the child to his or her parents; placing the child with another suitable relative; or releasing the child for adoption, guardianship or long-term foster care. In many cases, the CASA is the only consistent adult in the child’s life, providing emotional stability during this very difficult transition period.

How we are funded

Voices for Children has served approximately 45,000 abused and neglected children since its inception in 1980. During the current fiscal year 2007-2008, the organization has an active volunteer base of more than 500 and is on track to provide more than 7,500 children with child advocacy and case management services.

The cost to provide each child with an advocate is approximately \$1,980 per year. Expenses include recruiting, screening, training, supervising, and supporting our volunteers. With an ever-growing number of foster children entering the system, Voices for Children must continue to increase its resources. Only partially funded by individual and corporate gifts, direct-mail campaigns, grants, and state/county monies, the organization hosts a number of fundraising events throughout the year, including an annual golf tournament and an annual evening of music, *Starry, Starry Night*.

For more information about Voices for Children, please contact Kim Penny, Vice President of Marketing & Development, at 858-569-2096 ext. 245 or kimp@voices4children.com.

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Children's Stories*

Jeff

When the staff member of a group home leaned over to tell Jeff goodnight, she felt a lump in his bed. Jeff started crying. "I didn't steal it, I didn't steal it", he said. She reached under the sheet and pulled out an old, shriveled potato. When she asked why it was there, he said, "When I was young, I was hungry every night. I put the potato in my bed so I would always have something to eat."

Jeff, age 7, was diagnosed with Reactive Attachment Disorder (RAD). He wasn't able to remember anything about his past until that potato was found. When he became upset, he acted out violently because his feelings were too painful to vocalize. These behaviors were so extreme he couldn't go to school or interact with other children. Remembering why he had taken the potato to bed—as poignant as that story is—was a significant breakthrough in therapy for this youngster who had nearly starved to death as a little boy.

Jeff's CASA began this case as a student with a major in social work, her chosen vocation. By the time graduation rolled around, this dedicated individual knew accepting a job as a social worker would mean she'd have to give up her work as a CASA. So she put her dreams on hold to help this little boy. Then she researched and ultimately became an expert in RAD. She located a therapist who specialized in this illness, convinced her to take the case, then convinced the judge, through many placement changes, to keep Jeff with that therapist. Thanks to his Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA), Jeff now remembers what his painful past was like and his violent outbursts no longer occur.

Update: After remarkable advances in Jeff's behavior, he was placed in a loving adoptive home. However, following a bitter divorce, his foster mom told him that he might have to go to a different place to live. On his 8th birthday, Jeff asked if he could take his new toys with him when he moved. The foster mother told him she would adopt him instead. After a joyous outburst, he called his CASA to tell her that he had found his "forever home." When he went to therapy with his foster mother the next day, the therapist asked him if he was going to change his name. Confused, Jeff shook his head. "Well, I'm going to change my name," the foster mom said. Jeff thought for a minute, and a smile lit his face when he said, "Your name will be Mom!"

* All of these stories are true. Only the names have been changed.



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Ricardo

Five-year-old Ricardo was homeless and withdrawn. He was found in a filthy bamboo tent in a canyon not far from Mission Valley with cocaine in his system. His Dad and Dad's girlfriend fed it to him to keep him quiet so they could enjoy their daily high at the expense of this fragile child. His mother abandoned him nearly four years ago. He seldom had a shower. When asked what foods he liked, Ricardo said he thought he might like cereal, but he'd never had any. When questioned about what he wanted most, the only request he knew to make was a Lion King toy from Burger King.

There are children in our midst whose lives are so limited they struggle through each day simply to survive. But Ricardo is one of the lucky ones. He was placed in protective custody and a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) was assigned to him through Voices for Children. Ricardo's CASA taught him about the joy of giving and receiving love and care.

Update: We are happy to report that, through the efforts of his Court Appointed Special Advocate, Ricardo has been adopted by a loving family and for the first time in his young life, Ricardo has a real home.

Tony

Even with the help of his Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA), Tony's placements were problematic and he struggled with four failed placements in succession. It made no difference to his CASA. He visited the boy faithfully, played sports, went for walks and outings, and talked about Tony's hopes for the future. Most importantly, he believed in Tony. He routinely pointed out Tony's strengths to the court as well as to the professionals involved in the case, who only focused on his problems. All the while, he was determined to find a good placement for the boy. When an acceptable group home was found, he worked closely with them, persuading them to take a chance on Tony. Soon, Tony learned to control his aggressive outbursts and is now considered a role model for other residents. His self-esteem soared, and, though his IQ is low, he has been able to transfer to a regular public school for part of the day. Tony's CASA also serves as an educational surrogate, helping him meet his educational goals and encouraging him to consider career options that are both appropriate for, and appealing to, him.

Thanks to the unconditional love, support and advocacy of his CASA, this child, who began life with *every* strike against him, has a future that looks promising.



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Emily

Emily was born with cocaine in her system and abandoned by her mother at the hospital. A few days after her birth, she entered the foster care system. Soon, it became obvious that she was not a typical baby. At the age of two and a half, Emily was diagnosed with autism.

Autistic children are the most difficult to place in adoptive homes, but that didn't stop the CASA assigned to Emily's case. Over the years, she visited her every week, observed her in the classroom, initiated, then monitored her Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings, and described the small, but significant steps Emily made, to the Judge overseeing her case. The CASA requested special services to facilitate her development, and, ultimately, asked that a national search be made for an adoptive home. A couple from the Midwest, who had previously adopted special needs children, expressed an interest in Emily. The CASA flew Emily to her new home.

Without the love and care of a Court Appointed Special Advocate, Emily's future would have been dim indeed. However, with the specialized services she received through the CASA's advocacy, Emily began to make enough progress for her to be placed with a family who would continue to help her advance. A national search for that family was the ultimate gift the CASA could provide.

