Volunteer Viewpoint

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Former CASA board member and CASA Volunteer since 2017

I have lived in Baton Rouge most of my life and, until I became a parent, I had no idea about the prevalence of child abuse in our community. Baton Rouge is not unique in this respect. According to the Louisiana Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) website, there were 1,744 investigations of child abuse statewide last month. That averages about 62 a day. Now admittedly some of the complaints are without merit, and certainly, statistics can be misleading, but what if just half of that number required state intervention? When the state does intervene, the child is removed from their abusive or neglected situation and placed with a willing relative or in foster care. In February 2019, the Louisiana DCFS served almost 5,000 children in foster care.

East Baton Rouge Parish is fortunate to have an effective CASA program. CASA stands for Court Appointed Special Advocate. This is a nonprofit organization that trains volunteers to advocate for children in the state foster care system. The ultimate objective is permanence for the child, either by reunification with the family or by adoption.

I became interested in CASA about 15 years ago. Baton Rouge is my home, and I strongly felt I could not sit back and do nothing when children in my town were living in deplorable, unimaginable situations. In a practical sense, I was reluctant to become an advocate while I was working because of the time required for training and working a case. Emotionally, I feared the attachment I knew would develop. I volunteered to serve CASA as a member of the board of directors. The board oversees the program but more importantly raises money to keep the organization alive.

When I retired from practicing law a couple of years ago, I underwent advocate training. Since then I have had two cases involving five children.

I am not allowed to give details of the cases because of the children’s confidentiality, but I would like to share some of the things I have learned in the advocacy process. In the interest of full disclosure – I am not an expert, just an observer, and these views are solely my own.

1. People are not born knowing how to parent.
Parenting is hard work and doing it well doesn’t come naturally for many people. We learn how to parent from our parents, and if the examples we see involve physical and mental brutality, that’s how we believe parenting is done.

2. The children almost always want to go home.
Despite what torment foster children may have endured in their homes, they usually long to return to their parents and siblings. There must be some innate sense of loving forgiveness that allows them to expect improvement in their lives.

3. Raising a child really does take a village.
I have been amazed by the number of people who touch any one child’s case, each of them motivated by doing what’s in the best interest of the child.
Foster parent – adoptive parent
DCFS caseworker – DCFS adoption worker
Judge and court personnel
Lawyers for all parties – parents and children
Therapists of every type – physical, occupational, speech, mental health
Physicians of every type – pediatricians, developmental specialists, psychiatrists, dentists
School personnel – teachers, guidance counselors, resource specialists
CASA volunteer

4. There is hope.
In Baton Rouge, in 2017, 181 CASA volunteers provided a voice in court for 370 children involved in 232 child abuse cases. Advocates were appointed to 119 new cases involving 208 children. Every child in our parish in need of a CASA had one.

In 2018, Louisiana had a record year for finalized adoptions with 912 children finding permanent homes with 631 families. Another 2,332 children were reunified with their families, either returning home or to the custody or guardianship of a relative. The incidence of adoptions for teenagers and children with special needs is also on the rise.

I believe every child deserves a safe and stable home where he or she is free to live, learn, love and be loved. I plan to continue doing a small part to make that happen, one child at a time.

*Names changed for confidentially purposes.*