

CASA Volunteer Profile: Pamela Berger, 2011 CASA Volunteer of the Year in Georgia

Pamela Berger, the 2011 CASA Volunteer of the Year in Georgia from Rockdale CASA, recently shared her thoughts on being a CASA volunteer.

Georgia CASA: When did you become a CASA volunteer?

Pam: I was sworn-in as a CASA volunteer in Rockdale County in March of 2000.

Georgia CASA: How did you learn about CASA? What made you want to become involved?

Pam: I first learned about the CASA program through an ad in our local paper. I have to admit that it took me awhile to decide if I wanted to become a CASA volunteer! I don't have children of my own, but for as long as I can remember, I always knew I was meant to help and be involved with children. The advocacy work really appealed to me, but I remember thinking about whether I could really be qualified to do that kind of work. I literally cut out the ad and kept it for two years before responding! I had tried on a few other volunteer roles, but none appealed to me as much as the possibility of really being able to make a difference in a child's life. And once I looked into that first child's eyes, I wondered why it took me so long!

Georgia CASA: What qualities do you think are important to have as a CASA volunteer?

Pam: I think passion is first on my list. As a CASA volunteer, you have to have passion for the work we do and truly believe you can make a difference. Passion is what gets me through the frustrations and heartbreak; it helps me carry on the significant work necessary to see a child through probably the worst part of his/her life. The next quality would be the ability to stay open and non-judgmental. Some of my early mistakes as a CASA volunteer came because I had pre-judged and already decided what I thought about a parent, which in the end was wrong. We have to stay open to be able to see a family's circumstances from different perspectives, as well as think outside the box to explore different possibilities and solutions. Also, keeping a cheerful disposition and positive outlook helps keep me going. Without a positive attitude and joyful spirit, it would be difficult to get up each day and help a child deal with the pain and confusion of why they are not home with his/her parents.

Georgia CASA: What has been your greatest challenge as a CASA volunteer?

Pam: One of the greatest challenges for me is maneuvering through a broken child welfare system. As a CASA volunteer, you do your best to keep a case moving along, only to meet with obstacles that are completely out of your control, such as parents not following their case plan, case managers leaving and having to start over with a new case manager. Most frustrating is advocating for a child who desperately needs psychological help and just when you see the therapy begin to have some positive results, even that becomes disrupted and the child has to begin again with another therapist. To say we have to have patience is an understatement, but most important is persistence.

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Georgia CASA: What has been your greatest success as a CASA volunteer?

Pam: While working a very difficult case, the unthinkable happened on another case I had worked on for five years. Nothing prepares you for the reality of having two children who you've helped become adopted and then have the family turn them back in to DFCS [Department of Family and Children Services] in less than a year with the parents saying, "The children are just too much trouble and we don't want them anymore." It's heartbreaking! The children were taken back to a different county DFCS office. This DFCS office knew absolutely nothing about the children and since they were legally adopted, the case was closed and the files sealed. I found out about their return and called the DFCS office, introduced myself and told them I knew everything about the children. At the time, this county did not have a CASA program. I contacted my CASA program director and our judge, who in turn helped me become appointed as their CASA volunteer again. It was a very difficult time for the children and me. I shared their disappointment, sadness and anger, but I absolutely cannot imagine what it would have been like for them had they not had their CASA volunteer. I still advocate and remain in contact with both children.

Georgia CASA: Tell about one of your CASA success stories.

Pam: One case in particular was probably the most testing for me. I first walked into this home that I could honestly describe as one of the worst I've seen in my 11 years volunteering. This was a single parent home; the father had been gone for a long time and the mother had mental health and substance abuse problems. The children were 11 and 13. You could not look at one square foot without seeing insects. The smell is one I will never forget – puppies allowed to roam at random, dog feces on the floor and dog urine in the beds. Worst of all, the children were dirty, had numerous insect bites and they smelled. One of the children slept with their mother – you could not enter the child's bedroom due to all the piles of clothing and garbage around the bed. The other child slept on a mattress that was placed on a table in the dining room. The sheets were so dirty they looked black.

I began my research where most CASA volunteers begin – reading the case file. As I sat in the conference room, the DFCS case manager began delivering volumes of files on this family – five volumes – a 10 year DFCS history. I spent over five hours reading and making notes! DFCS wanted to keep the children in the home – and help mom clean it and herself up. This had already been tried many times. The only thing different about the current case than the past DFCS involvement was that the children were now seven years older! I spoke at length with DFCS about having the children removed for their safety, but we were at total opposite ends on our recommendations.

I testified in court about the conditions of the home, the mother and the children. Thankfully, the judge agreed with the CASA recommendation. With every visit to the home to check for any improvement, I was regularly screamed at and cursed at by the mom and her sister. But worst of all for me – the children did not trust me because I was the one who recommended they be removed from their home.

All the frustration, conflict and heartache with this case was worth it. Two years later, we closed the case. During my reading of the case files on this family, I had jotted down the name of a person, who I contacted during the course of the case, and that ultimately produced a safe, nurturing and viable family for these children. Their lives have been dramatically changed and they have been transformed into two children who are happy and will grow up loved and cared for.

Georgia CASA: Is there anything else you'd like to share?

Pam: I am reminded constantly that when I feel frustrated and I want to give up that I'm no longer thinking about the child. That, unfortunately, is the child's main problem in the first place – people giving up on him/her! We struggle with torn families, lost children and their broken hearts. CASA volunteers willingly take on the task of recommending, to the best of our ability, workable solutions. We offer knowledge, compassion, encouragement, problem solving and perseverance. We've had to start over, take two steps forward and one back. We experience the frustration, anger and joys involved in trying to find good solutions for these children and their families. Sometimes our finished work cannot be perfect, but we do it to the best of our ability. Our goal is the safety, well-being and future of a child. It does not take just one of us, but all of us, working together to find answers that will be in the best interests for these children and their futures.

I'm certainly overwhelmed and honored that I was named CASA of the Year for Georgia. Any time I can speak in front of people to tell them about the CASA program I consider that a real bonus. To me it is so important to tell everyone about this wonderful program and our success. I had a very unique opportunity earlier this year to have the Georgia State Senate pass a [resolution](#) that acknowledged my 11 years of volunteer service with the CASA program. Being honored on the Senate floor was amazing, but more importantly, I was given an opportunity to speak to the Senators of Georgia about our CASA program. I challenged them to get informed and involved with their districts and juvenile courts and find out what is happening within our child welfare system. After all, our future depends on the well-being and care of our children today. Being involved in helping a child actually have a chance of becoming a person who can contribute to our society constantly fills my heart. CASA volunteers do remarkable things every day. I am proud to be a part of this life changing organization and will continue to do my best for the children of Rockdale County.