

## WHAT'S A CASA?/WHERE'S THE CASA?

*By Stephen Ott, Attorney in Fayetteville, GA and Municipal Court Judge in Peachtree City, GA*

Having served as the special appointed attorney general (SAAG) representing the Department of Family and Children Services (DFCS) for over eight years and also serving as guardian ad litem (GAL) for close to three years, I have experienced quite a few changes designed to improve the system we use to protect our children. One such change was implemented in the Griffin Judicial Circuit by the late Honorable Terry Schell; the most compassionate judge to have sat on the bench.

All of us that make our living in Juvenile Court started hearing a rumor that we were going to get a CASA program. Of course, change is scary; the question was immediately, "What's a CASA?" The rumor mill spun constantly like a well oiled machine. Guardians believed the CASA would replace them. As the SAAG, I determined that the CASA would be there to provide over watch of my client, DFCS. Of course no lawyer wants more oversight. I also believed that a CASA would be just someone else in the courtroom that I had to convince my client was right. Court clerks thought that the CASA would be yet someone else wanting copies, calendars, and other pesky things. No one was quite sure, "What's a CASA?"

CASA arrived. I recall hearing the greeting, "What's a CASA?" often in the courtroom. Also often overheard was "We don't need a CASA on this one." Abundantly patient Judge Schell began appointing CASA volunteers anyway. I can only imagine how difficult the task must have been for those early CASAs. Court was held and the CASAs were not notified; children moved and the CASAs were not told; and children returned without CASA involvement. CASAs were appointed, but all of us with a "vested" interest in juvenile court remained skeptical and I am sure, perhaps inadvertently, impeded the program. The CASAs stuck with it. They came to court, wanted or not. They submitted reports, wanted or not. VOLUNTEERS fought the fight to be allowed to enter into the heart wrenching fight for children.

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Today, I am no longer SAAG but often appointed the GAL. I take the job seriously and do all the work I feel is needed to help make decisions for the children. Of course, taking the lives of hurting children to heart can be overwhelming in time and emotional resources. Countless hours can be spent on just one case. The case manager has a particular job; as does the SAAG, the GAL, the parents and the judge. But who brings it all together? Who can wrap their soothing arms around hurting children, hold the hand of a sobbing parent while holding that parent accountable, cut through the bureaucratic quagmire of DFCS, talk to every relative, travel to every placement and bring all the competing interest together? In the sterile environment of the courtroom, how can the heart of the case, the heart of the family be heard, felt and seen? All these questions can be answered, "CASA."

Fast forward a few years. We have all seen the dramatic impact CASAs have on the lives of children. I have personally experienced CASA volunteers turn children's lives 180 degrees from the depths of despair to the great heights only consistent love and compassion can bring. When court convenes, whether we start a new case or revisit an older one, the CASAs are present. As the guardian, I request a CASA on every case. The court honors the request. Often, before I can even ask, the judge says, "Let's get a CASA on this one." I have seen time and time again, especially in particularly tough cases, someone proclaim that there is a lot going on, that there seems to be a great deal of conflicting information, that the child could use an extra set of eyes and a warm heart in which to seek comfort. As cases come to court, if it's not the GAL, if it's not the SAAG, it is the court that cries out, "WHERE'S THE CASA?"

Long live CASA!