

CASA* FOR KIDS

* court appointed special advocate



my very special CASA children

by Joyce Funda

Cynicism and doubt about the human condition come easily to me due to 27 years of professional experience in family matters. My CASA volunteer experiences have, at times, fed that cynical view, but more often have softened my heart, opened my mind and touched my soul and spirit in a lasting way. I have the honor of being a CASA volunteer to a family with multiple children. The family has been in and out of the system frequently. I've been the assigned CASA throughout the times when the Court determined the appointment of a CASA was necessary for the best interests of the children.

These children have constantly amazed me with their seemingly indomitable bright, positive and loving spirits despite untold hardships that span their young lives.

The children were recently removed again from their home. As I scrambled to figure out who was where, what had to be done, and all the other immediate tasks common to all cases, I went to see the oldest child.

She had been watching for me at the appointed time. As I walked in, she shouted my name, ran to me and threw her arms around me as she hugged me tightly and sobbed. I comforted her, took her outside to sit down and held her in my arms, rocking her as she let out her emotions.

It was a very bittersweet experience for me. The realization of just how much I care for these children hit me. But, so did the sadness that a stranger, randomly assigned by the system, has such an important, bonded relationship with this child, a relationship missing from her life.

I'll always be there for these children, but they desperately need a permanent, positive and loving relationship within their family, or friends who are like family, or a placement with people who can fill this need.

My old friends, cynicism and doubt, once again are nibbling at the edges of my mind as I consider the probability of this happening for these wonderful children.



We Advocate

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q u o t e

“When I was very young, most of my heroes wore capes, flew through the air, or picked up buildings with one arm. They were spectacular and got a lot of attention. But as I grew, my heroes changed, so that now I can honestly say that anyone who does anything to help a child is a hero to me.”

~ Fred Rogers



You can be a hero in the life of a child through your financial support or by becoming a CASA volunteer.

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a new foundation

The Fund Raising Committee of the CASA Advisory Council have been discussing opportunities for securing long term, stable funding for meeting Flathead County CASA's mission. The local CASA Chapter depends heavily on grants and donations to provide the resources to fund the administration and other support required to provide its needed service. In July, several members of the Advisory Committee met with Intermountain Children's Home Board Chair Dee Incoronato and Executive Director Jim Fitzgerald, at the home of Bill and Betsy Bayne, to discuss the important work of CASA and how to assure its stability. At the September Advisory Council Meeting Fund Raising Co-Chairs Betsy Bayne and Tom McElwain announced the efforts to explore the formation of a Foundation dedicated to helping assure a dependable source of funding for the local CASA Chapter. The Advisory Council gave their encouragement to the effort.



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CASA volunteer rides for abused kids

by David Whitney, CASA Volunteer

I'm stunned by the photographs taken of the children when they are removed from abusive or negligent parents. The children always look awful – swollen eyes that never seem to cry, dark circles under them like they haven't slept, exaggerated features and a depth of sadness and fear so enormously private and painful that you'd think no camera could capture it...but they do.

That's what I remember most about my first glimpse of the CASA files when I sat down at the Kalispell office to see if this case is where I wanted to put hundreds of hours of my time over the next months. Can I help these children? Can I understand their pain? How can these children ever know an adult's love after what they've been through?

I'd like to say that I think about these things as I force my bicycle up the steepest side of Foys Lake Road for the umpteenth time, hoping that this time all the climbs before will make this one a snap. I don't. It doesn't. Park 2 Park Montana, the 400-mile ride from Glacier National Park to Yellowstone National Park that starts Labor Day, is more about me than the kids for whom I will ride.

I'm riding for personal reasons. I need the sense of climbing to the top, at my own speed – slow but steady, but climbing. I want my bicycle to guide me to a higher dimension. I need a reminder that CASA means hope and progress, goals that are clear and attainable, and that awesome challenges are no bar to success. Slow but steady is okay. Really.

I'm a 61-year-old retired newspaper reporter. I've seen awful things. For eight years I covered the daily drama and heartbreak that emerged in the trials and hearings inside the Multnomah County Courthouse in Portland. Using the case of a 13-year-old girl charged with her second murder, I convinced The Oregonian to take on the successful state Supreme Court fight to open juvenile courts to the public so we could understand how the state treats seriously damaged children. Most of my career was in Washington, D.C., where I wrote about Congress and, sadly, political scandals that seemed never to end.

Kalispell seemed like a perfect place to retire. My family is here. There are no subways and the airport doesn't have multiple concourses. Surely there was something I could do that would make use of my professional background for a greater good.

That's when I heard about CASA. The recession was in full swing by the time we arrived here in 2008. Financial troubles typically lead to other stresses, and children



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are often the victims. Sure, alcohol is a big part of the problem. But in my brief experience here, as big of a problem is prescription drugs – the hard stuff, the plethora of synthetic pain medications that quickly imprison spirits and devour reason. By spring 2009, the number of abuse and neglect cases in Flathead County had doubled over the previous year. We were leading the state. There was a desperate need for more CASA volunteers to serve as the eyes and ears of overworked judges buried under the towering caseload. So I volunteered. This was something I could do.

I'm into my fourth case now. There have been no miracles, but I have made a difference. I know that. I've seen the children transformed from the broken spirits in the photos I described above into happier people. Once they were scared to see me when I arrived for my weekly visits. Now they greet me at the door. With any luck, the transformation breaks the cycle of abuse and neglect often seen in these deeply troubled families, but I will never know for sure. And I move on.

Bicycle riding has always been an escape, a stress reliever. I used to commute by bicycle when I worked in Washington, D.C. I've participated in two AIDs rides from Raleigh, N.C., back to Washington. A decade ago I did an 800-mile ride around Cuba, writing about the experience in a Sunday take-out that was still drawing comments from readers before I retired. I've been in the saddle a long time.

So I ride, inspired by CASA, inspired by exhausted social workers, and inspired by the children I have known whose eyes are no longer so sad. Please wish us all good luck. Believe me, all of us need it.

There is a great need for more people to advocate for the abused and neglected children of Flathead Valley. To learn more about becoming a CASA volunteer give our local program, CASA for Kids, a call at 406 755-7208.

active CASAs

Lynne Beauclair	Lila Leuning
Rene Berry	Mary Levitt
Debbie Biggar	Chris Lindsay
Alex Bokor	Janet Loranger
Rex Boller	Curt Lund
Katie Boyd	Shannon Lund
John Brakefield	Bronwen Lundgren
Francis Breidenbach	Clariese Lyons
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Don Clark	Wally Massie
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Kelli Eilers	Kathy Norlander
Cheryl Ellingson	Mary Obermiller
Joyce Funda	Chany Ockert
Joan Gates	Pati Pennington
Gordon Gibbs	Annabel Petty
Kathy Gipe	Michelle Rensel
Kim Gress	Shari Roubinek
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Dory Hicks	DJ Steines
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thanks for all that you do!



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OTHER: **Use your imagination and let us know what you can do**

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Mail to: *CASA for Kids*, 1203 Hwy 2 West, Suite 39, Kalispell, MT 59901 • (406) 755-7208

the spirit of Christmas concert

by Pastor Dave Merkel

The Spirit of Christmas Concert will be held at 6:30 PM on Thursday, December 9, 2010 at Flathead High School Auditorium in Kalispell to benefit Flathead CASA for Kids and northern Flathead Valley Food Banks.

The concert is an annual event for Pastor David Merkel and Penni Chisholm who combine forces to produce a wonderfully moving show that includes additional area musical performers and choirs. This event is held to nurture the spirit of Christmas in our area, to build awareness of the plight of abused children and the CASA's role in their lives, and to raise much needed funds and support for CASA for Kids and the Flathead Valley Food Banks.

Pastor Dave and Penni Chisholm are well known professional musicians. Because of their passion for CASA for Kids and their community this concert is truly a gift from their hearts and is undoubtedly a highlight of the holiday season.



CASA for Kids holiday gift drive

Each year we coordinate with community partners to provide gifts to foster children and youth, ages 0 – 18. This year we have seen an increase in children entering foster care. We really could use your support! Your donation of a gift card or new, unwrapped toy, book, clothing item, etc... could make this holiday season just a little brighter for child in foster care. For information call CASA for Kids, 755-7208.



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