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CASA volunteers plan to study law

Pair inspired by their work with children

By DONNA HARRIS
SUN HERALD

PASCAGOULA -- After representing local children in need for nearly a year, two Jackson County volunteers hope to make it a permanent career.

Sarah Morrison and the Rev. Al Sturgeon are leaving the Coast in August for law school - Morrison to Florida State and Sturgeon to Pepperdine. Both say their work with CASA spurred them to take the step to law careers.

As court-appointed special advocates, they are trained volunteers charged by a judge to represent the best interest of their adolescent clients in court. Most of their work is done in the Jackson County Youth Court.

Both learned techniques as CASA volunteers that will help them as lawyers.

To provide a judge with enough information to make decisions about the child's future, a CASA volunteer must carefully research the child's background by talking to the child, parents, family members, social workers, school officials, health care providers and others in that child's life as well as reviewing all school and medical records and case worker reports.

"Those two have the most beautiful hearts," said CASA Director Frances Alsop. "They have really made a difference in children's lives."

Morrison, a Gulfport marketing coordinator for a real estate investment company, considered law while enrolled at Ole Miss. Her sorority held fundraisers for CASA and when she graduated she took a few years to decide if law was in her future. She chose to be a CASA volunteer because it allows hands-on work and she can see how her involvement directly affects her clients.

"Somewhere down the road today or tomorrow or 30 years from now, hopefully what you've done made a difference for that child," she said.

She's learned a lot by watching Youth Court Judge Sharon Sigalis interact with the children. "She's a strong-minded woman in the legal system, with a heart of gold. She's tough and doesn't let anything get past her," Morrison said.

Sturgeon's background is as a teacher and a basketball coach, and most recently as pastor of Ocean Springs Church of Christ.

He plans to study alternative dispute resolution to become a mediator. "We need to get into the messy situations that exist in the world and teach people how to resolve their conflicts and learn to get along," he said.

Morrison and Sturgeon would like to see replacements sign up for CASA training that starts mid-May.

"If anyone is serious about making a difference in the world, there's no better way to do it than to be the voice for children," Sturgeon said.

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