



## 17 new volunteers, \$3,000 donation boosts CASA

Wednesday, July 02, 2008

By **APRIL M. HAVENS**

Court Appointed Special Advocates for children hopes 17 new volunteers and a \$3,000 donation will help fuel the organization's growth in 2008.

CASA volunteers take on one or two abused and neglected children cases each and act as an extra set of eyes and ears for the Jackson County Youth Court. They spend time with the children, their families and others, which helps the volunteer make recommendations for the child in court.

On Monday, CASA graduated 17 volunteers from its rigorous 30-hour training period, bringing the number of volunteers to 30, said executive director Frances Allsup. Additionally, there are 10 Friends of CASA, volunteers who don't take cases but help the organization in other ways, such as events and fundraising.

Also at Monday's class induction at the B.E. "Mac" McGinty Civic Center, the Gulf Coast Corvette Club presented a \$3,000 check to the nonprofit. Allsup said the money will be used to recruit more volunteers and raise awareness, which was a major goal of 2008.

Ken Klein, show chairman for the Corvette club, said the group supports CASA because "there's no better way to invest in our children."

Allsup called the donation a blessing. "It takes this kind of private money to keep us funded because we are funded through United Way," she said.

CASA volunteers represent many ages, ethnicities and economic backgrounds, but they all have one goal in common: They believe children deserve fair representation and a familiar, friendly face in the court room.

"We are a constant and a belief system," Allsup said. "These children are shuffled through the system and see different faces every time, but we are there to give them stability."

New volunteer Debbie Braudis, a mother of eight grown children, decided to join CASA when her daughter, a Colorado CASA volunteer, encouraged her to use her motherly skills to help other children.

"My ultimate goal would be the moment that child chooses to call me about something, like what color should I dye my hair or anything, versus them having to call me because they're required to," she said.

New recruit Blair Marques agrees. "We want to become good friends and someone they can count on," she said. "The ultimate payback is making sure these children are safe."

Six-year volunteer Robert Stanfield said CASA has the ability to have long-term effects on families, not just a one-time representation in court. "You have the chance to change people's lives and change their habits," he said. "You have the ability to maybe change generations in this family down the road."

Henry Williams, a four-year volunteer, said it is a special thing to see a child begin to make positive steps instead of negative ones. "They're not bad kids," he said.

"And sometimes it's not necessarily bad parents either," Stanfield added.

Youth Court Judge Sharon Sigalas spoke to the volunteers, praising them for the time spent on each case and for their impact in children's lives. The volunteers are excellent courtroom helpers, she said, noting they "might see something we miss."

Sigalas also administered the volunteer's oath, which makes them a part of the court system.

New volunteers who took the oath Monday are Katie Allsup, Debbie Braudis, Galene Conley, Toscha DuBose, Deborah Gill, Neresuia Johnson, Anna Martin, Blair Marques, Mary Montgomery, Carol Perry, Brenda Ramsey, Sandra Roberts, Rebecca Rowley, Taleta Sager, Kathryn Sepulveda, Laura Taylor and Priscilla Walley.

Frances Allsup said the organization is always looking for dedicated volunteers to help the 1,600 children in Jackson County who qualify for the services. CASA can only take on as many cases as the number of volunteers allow, she said.

The Rev. Al Sturgeon, a volunteer since last year, said working with families face to face and being able to directly see who is benefiting from the work is one factor that separates CASA from other organizations, and he encourages anyone who's interested to find out more about the program.

Reporter April Havens can be reached at [ahavens@themississippipress.com](mailto:ahavens@themississippipress.com) or 228-934-1478.

Copyright 2008 gulflive.com. All Rights Reserved.