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Foster-youth group wants more men to join volunteer ranks

About half of foster youth are boys, but men comprise only 18 percent of volunteers with Child Advocates of Placer County

By Sena Christian, The Press Tribune



Photo by Anne Stokes

Roseville resident Don Genasci volunteers as a court-appointed special advocate for Child Advocates of Placer County.

Don Genasci has no problem getting his hands dirty.

The large backyard of his Roseville house is finely manicured with Himalayan birch, redwood and red maple trees, several plants and a low border he built from stone. Yard work keeps this retired Oakmont High School principal and assistant superintendent busy.

But the 67-year-old also gets his hands dirty in a much more meaningful way as a Court Appointed Special Advocate for Child Advocates of Placer County. These volunteers, called CASAs, advocate on behalf of foster youth, promoting their best interest in the courtroom, academic achievement, appropriate medical care and safe, permanent housing.

Ideally, these children will avoid juvenile hall, teen pregnancy and drug use, and leave the child-welfare system as independent, successful and healthy young adults.

"You'll go to shelters, you'll go to courts, you'll see meth," Genasci said. "Some people don't want to dirty their hands. But what are we going to do if nobody gets their hands dirty?"

Child Advocates of Placer County has about 170 volunteers, which includes CASAs and mentors. Genasci, though, is in the minority. The group lacks male volunteers and hopes to garner more. While about 50 percent of the estimated 300 or so local foster youth are boys, only 18 percent of volunteers are men, said Executive Director Don Kleinfelder.

"I think, for men, they volunteer for little league, or soccer or Boy Scouts," Kleinfelder said. "The one-on-one nature of being a CASA volunteer scares some guys. There's a nurturing element to it and some consider that women's work."

But serving as a CASA doesn't have to be intimidating — volunteers can simply hang out with the kid, grab a hamburger and talk. Overall, the goal is to be a reliable, supportive and consistent presence in the child's life. This is especially critical for foster boys, considering many come from circumstances absent of positive male role models.

"The roles (of volunteers) are the same," Genasci said. "But possibly as a male you have a chance to have an impact that for one reason or another a female can't provide."

Advocating for foster youth

In the United States, about 463,000 kids live in foster care, according to the Department of Health and Human Services. In California, there are roughly 80,000 foster kids.

Although the number of foster youth in Placer County has dropped in the past five years, Kleinfelder said, the need for court advocates and mentors continues.

His organization has 25 kids on a list, waiting for an adult-volunteer match.

Placer County's comprehensive and collaborative attempt to meet the needs of foster children has contributed to the decrease, Kleinfelder said. The county takes an "upstream" approach, using intervention and prevention tools to catch at-risk kids before they're removed from their homes.

"Nothing is more dramatic than pulling a kid out of their home," Kleinfelder said.

Child Advocates of Placer County primarily deals with the county's Juvenile Dependency Court, which serves children who have been removed from the home because of neglect, abuse or abandonment. In most cases, a child is taken from the house because of neglect caused by substance abuse, such as alcohol or methamphetamine. The rest of the time, children are removed as a result of physical or sexual abuse, Kleinfelder said.

These children then become wards of the state, ending up in foster homes, group homes or emergency shelters.

Throughout California, dwindling financial resources limit the ability of the child-welfare workers to adequately investigate cases — a process that typically helps judges make decisions regarding reunification with parents, adoption or continued foster care.

"(CASAs) act as the eyes and ears of the judge and the voice of the youth," Kleinfelder said.

They undergo 30 hours of training and are sworn in by the judge as officers of the court. They generally commit to between 10 and 20 hours a month for at least a year.

About three years ago, Genasci attended a CASA orientation and the program struck a chord. He has since worked with three male foster youth.

"With my background as an educator, I was aware of foster youth," he said. "(But) there was something in the back of my mind that thought, 'I wonder if we can do better by these kids?'"

He would meet with his assigned child once a week to attend sporting events, go see a movie or grab food together. He got to know people in the child's life, such as foster parents, biological parents, teachers, therapists and attorneys. He familiarized himself with the details of the child's court order and attended court proceedings.

Genasci refrained from disclosing details to the Press Tribune because CASA volunteers must sign a confidentiality agreement.

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Each volunteer is also required to submit a report to the judge with recommendations regarding the child's future.

"(It's) a huge responsibility," Genasci said. "I'm not going to downplay it and say this is just fun and games."

Cultivating trust

Volunteers act as a sounding board for the child by first establishing trust. Foster youth are often skeptical of a volunteer's commitment and credibility.

"You have to be very patient," Genasci said. "The unfortunate thing is these kids had so many adults come and go in their lives, as a CASA you can just seem like another adult. So there's testing going on."

Placer County Children's System of Care stresses the importance of the permanence these adults offer in the lives of foster youth — and the benefit they give the court system.

"Court Appointed Special Advocates provide a profoundly positive impact to youth in the foster care system," said Director Richard Knecht. "They deliver not only unique mentoring and role modeling for young people, helping them learn and develop social and other skills, but they also deliver an impartial and objective viewpoint to the dependency court about what each child needs to be most successful."

The No. 1 contributing factor to at-risk youth succeeding as adults is having a caring adult in his or her life, according to Child Advocates of Placer County. Foster youth who have a CASA also receive more services, spend less time in foster care and are less likely to reenter the system.

Volunteers benefit from the arrangement, as well. One volunteer, Jim Coats, has worked with nine foster youth — one now studies at University of California at Berkeley, after attending more than 30 high schools. The two men keep in touch.

Genasci also continues to communicate with one of his foster kids.

"You adopt a point of view that we do all we can," Genasci said. "But you have to understand that in many cases you're coming in with odds pretty heavily stacked against you. It's in our job description to be an optimist and believe something better can happen with these children. Don't be devastated if it doesn't happen. The alternative of doing nothing is unacceptable."

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For more information about Child Advocates of Placer County, call (530) 887-1006 or visit www.casaplacer.org.

Keywords

Placer County, Children's System of Care, foster youth, Child Advocates of Placer County, volunteers

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On 1/12/11 at 04:17 PM, **MrsRoss** wrote:

CASA of Placer is a great organization to volunteer with. I mentor a teen through this programme also, and while it has it's challenges, it also brings great personal satisfaction. I feel a much more rounded member of this community, and agree with Don above when he says "The alternative of doing nothing is unacceptable".

Thanks for the article.

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On 1/13/11 at 02:05 PM, **PaulRedd** wrote:

The "one on one" nature of the task scares men because of the fear of being accused of something. We have created an environment where accusation is all that is required to completely destroy a man's life. Why would any man subject himself to that risk?

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