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Placer County court advocates assist foster children

Volunteer says program promoted changes in his attitude

By Bridget Jones, Journal Staff Writer



Ben Furtado/Auburn Journal

Auburn resident Bill Burchfield has been a court appointed special advocate for foster youth for three years. Burchfield said his past experiences have helped him relate to the children, and the program has inspired changes in him as well.

A local advocacy program is looking for more male volunteers, and one Auburn resident who's been down a rough path says he encourages residents to get involved.

The Court Appointed Special Advocates Program of the Child Advocates of Placer County mainly helps children going through a specific type of court process.

"Basically what we do is we train community volunteers to become officers of the court, which allows them to advocate in dependency court on behalf of foster youth," said Don Kleinfelder, executive director of Child Advocates of Placer County. "Dependency court is where the court removes the child because of abuse, neglect or abandonment. Within Placer County, on an average year, about 200 kids are removed from their homes because of abuse and neglect."

Child Advocates of Placer County, working with child protective services and the court hope to see children re-united with their families if possible, Kleinfelder said.

"The goal of the county is to get them re-unified, get them adopted ... do something as quickly as possible," Kleinfelder said.

The program's volunteers don't make any decisions about what will happen to children, they simply make recommendations about what they feel is best for a child after talking to everyone involved in that

youth's situation, Kleinfelder said.

Court appointed special advocates go through 30 hours of intensive training and are sworn in by the court. The volunteers have a court order to interview everyone involved in a particular child's case, including family, teachers and the child, Kleinfelder said.

Kleinfelder said the advocates serve two major roles.

"A CASA volunteer can be thought of as the eyes and ears of the judge and the voice of the child," he said.

Male advocates only work with male youth, and there is a great need for more male volunteers, Kleinfelder said.

Auburn resident Bill Burchfield, 69, has been a court appointed special advocate, or CASA, with the program for three years.

Burchfield and his wife, Marilyn, who is also a CASA, are involved in the program as a way to offer their help to those who need it, Burchfield said.

"We are retired, and we are through traveling, and we wanted to do something that was giving back to someone," he said.

Burchfield said his prior life experiences have been beneficial when relating to the kids he advocates for.

"Basically I had a drinking problem, and I went into a rehabilitation center (in 1988)," Burchfield said. "I tried to slow down and stop for years before that, and couldn't do it. I get to work with the kids, and I can see them going astray. They can very easily start drinking or using some kind of drugs, and I share my experience with them."

Burchfield said he tells the youth what kind of negative effect drinking and drugs can have on their schoolwork and the rest of their lives.

Burchfield said he hasn't had a drink in 17 years, and it changed his life by allowing him to become a school bus driver, provide transit training to others and, now that he is retired, participate in programs like CASA and The Red Cross.

Burchfield has acted as an advocate for seven children so far, and he has noticed some changes in himself over the years, he said.

"I find that I'm giving more to the kids," he said. "I have become more patient with people. I listen to what they say before I interrupt, and the biggest thing is I just don't judge people anymore."

Burchfield said he spends 15-20 hours a month with his CASA kids, and develops fatherly relationships with them.

"Especially this one, he was quiet and he would tell me things he wouldn't tell his mother or counselor because of his trust in me," Burchfield said. "When I was down in Texas last month I really missed seeing the two boys I have (currently). You really get attached to them in a way, too."

Nick Cunningham, a case supervisor for Child Advocates of Placer County, said not only do CASAs talk with the children about their situations, they also take part in fun activities with the kids.

"The icing on the cake is the mentor and youth have a lot of fun together," Cunningham said. "They often will engage in positive and healthy activities like going to a Kings game, going fishing or maybe to a Sunday matinee, all of which mean the world to our kids."

Burchfield said he encourages men in the community to get involved.

"I would say for any male in this community that wants to help, if you stick around just one (year) you might help some kid," he said. "I get cards from the kids, and they say, 'Thank you for helping me.'"

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Reach Bridget Jones at bridgetj@goldcountrymedia.com

Court Appointed Special Advocates Program

What: A volunteer opportunity to advocate for and help children going through the foster care system.

Where: 11641 Blocker Drive, Suite 220, Auburn

Website: casaplacer.org

Information: Call (530) 887-1006

Did you know?

Within Placer County, on an average year, about 200 kids are removed from their homes because of abuse and neglect, according to Don Kleinfelder, executive director of Child Advocates of Placer County.

Keywords

Court Appointed Special Advocates, Child Advocates of Placer County, Don Kleinfelder, Bill Burchfield, Nick Cunningham, volunteers

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