

The voice for a child

Volunteer Judd Holiday says working as a child advocate can be a rewarding experience

BY MARGARET SNIDER
GRANITE BAY VIEW CORRESPONDENT

Granite Bay resident Judd Holiday has been a volunteer with Child Advocates of Placer County for a year and a half. He has served as a Court Appointed Special Advocate, otherwise known as a CASA, and now as a Y2A (Youth to Adult) mentor.

Holiday has had a 29-year career in law enforcement and 15 years ago he was called out on a late-night interaction.

"(It was) with a high school age kid who was in a group home, who was attempting to kill himself," Holiday said. "I ended up catching him as he hung himself in a tree in the backyard."

At the time, Holiday had two young children and was working 60 hours a week.

"Listening to this young man over a period of about an hour talk about the life he'd gone through and how he'd suffered at the hands of his parents, I just thought, 'there's got to be some program out there that can in a positive way affect these kids,'" he said.

Holiday was a bomb technician and supervised the Sacramento Sheriff's Bomb Squad. He retired two years ago, and travels throughout the United States teaching classes on terrorism and explosives. His schedule now allows him to volunteer.

He had looked at a number of different options after his retirement.

"This is a type of volunteer opportunity unlike many others," Holiday said. "This is one where you're actually dealing with someone one on one."

As a volunteer, Holiday's work in law enforcement is incidental — there is no specialized background necessary for volunteers, who come from a variety of occupations and backgrounds.

"You just have to be someone that's willing to spend some time with somebody and listen to them," Holiday said.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

The CASA program is administered in Placer County by Child Advocates of Placer County. More information can be found at <http://casaplacer.org/>

As a CASA, Holiday helped to prevent abused, neglected and abandoned children from becoming lost in the Juvenile Dependency system. Working with the Placer County Superior Court, the CASA helps to find them safe, permanent homes.

A Y2A mentor is not associated with the court. In Holiday's words, his job is "just kind of spending time with them and trying to give advice when advice is appropriate, realizing your situation is probably completely different from theirs, their home environment is different, keeping all that in mind."

He checks in regularly with his case supervisor, Nick Cunningham.

"He is a very jolly, kind and interesting man, and through his retirement has found a wonderful passion to give back and work with our local foster and at-risk youth," Cunningham said.

Don Kleinfelder, formerly a hydrogeologist, has been executive director of

Child Advocates of Placer County and the CASA program for 13 years.

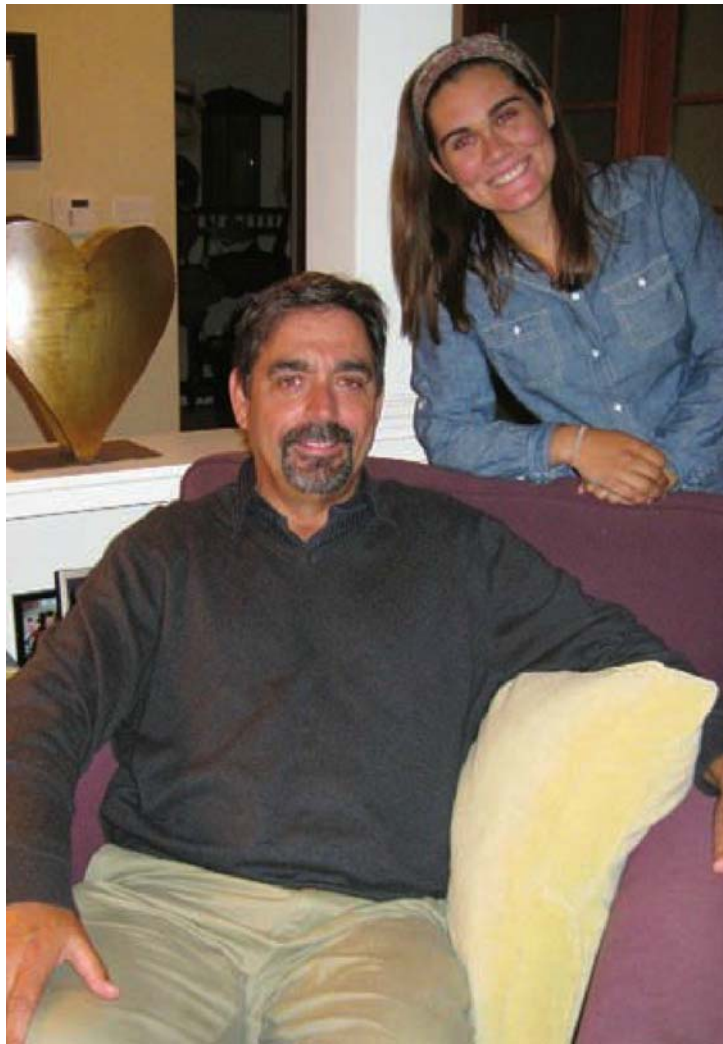
"CASA volunteers fill one great need," Kleinfelder said. "They act as the eyes and ears of the judge, and the voice of the child."

From 2006 through 2010, Kleinfelder said the program trained 252 new volunteers who have advocated for and mentored 493 foster and at-risk youth.

"Of these youth, only 4 percent have re-entered foster care after reunifying with their families, as opposed to our county average of 18 percent," he said.

CASA was first started by Superior Court Judge David Soukup in 1977, when he was faced with juvenile court cases in Seattle that required him to decide whether a child would be taken from, in many cases, the only home he or she had ever known, or be left in a situation which might be dangerous.

There was no one present whose job



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CASA volunteer Judd Holiday relaxes at his Granite Bay home with daughter Amy, 20.

it was to investigate and find out what the situation really was, to look out for the child's needs, and find out what would be best for him or her.

Now, CASA programs operate in all 50 states with more than 50,000 volunteers and more than 225,000 kids being served every year. In California, there are CASA programs in 43 counties and three tribal councils.

Currently Placer County has 195 trained CASA volunteers. The volunteers are thoroughly screened and go through orientation and 30 hours of training.

The need for volunteers is great, especially for male mentors and advocates.

In Placer County, 72 percent of Child Advocates of Placer County youth in need of a mentor are male, 52 percent of those in need of a CASA are male — but only 18 percent of the current volunteers are male.

Judd Holiday said that he had wanted a volunteer opportunity that was more than stacking boxes and counting postcards.

"It can be difficult," he said. "But the reward more than makes up for the difficulty. When the mother calls and says, 'Hey, man, I'm noticing a difference,' or the teacher says, 'Yeah, he really is doing better in school this month.' That's a pretty good reward, that's my feeling."