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## Local men lend helping hand to foster youth

Volunteer as a Court Appointed Special Advocate to provide support, guidance

By Sena Christian, The Press Tribune



Photo by Philip Wood

Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) Jim Coats, left, helped former foster youth Joey Skyler navigate the court system, providing him with support and guidance. Following Skyler's emancipation, the two men decided to remain friends.

Joey Skyler's future did not look bright.

His mom had died of a drug overdose when he was 9 and he'd spent most of his young life homeless. But that didn't prevent him from graduating high school and enrolling in college.

Along the way, Skyler, now 20, received the help of Citrus Heights resident Jim Coats, who served as a Court Appointed Special Advocate, or CASA, through Child Advocates of Placer County.

"A CASA representative is an opportunity to trust people in a world where there is nothing to trust," Skyler said. "You can't trust your family, or where you're going to live or your friends who are in a similar situation. This is one person you can trust."

These volunteers advocate on behalf of foster youth, promoting their best interest in the courtroom, academic achievement, appropriate medical care and safe, permanent housing.

Child Advocates of Placer County is seeking more male volunteers to work with male youth, which comprise about half of the local foster youth population. The organization has trained 20 men so far this year, up from 12 men in 2010.

"I love getting a call from volunteers excited to share with me that their boy has taken an interest in reading, is being much more polite and opening the door for people, has improved his math grade from a D to a B," said Nick Cunningham, case supervisor for Child Advocates of Placer County.

He said he heard about one young man sharing with his mentor that he was the first male to take an interest in his life.

"It was shocking for the mentor to hear this, but this is ... why we do what we do," Cunningham said. "Our community has young men craving positive attention, wanting a better life for themselves and they only need someone to take the

time and help show them the way."

Coats helped show Skyler the way, although the young man was already ahead of the curve. The two met in the fall of 2008. Skyler was on his way to graduating from Roseville High School with a 4.2 grade point average.

Coats was retired and had already raised his own children, so he trained to become a CASA. Skyler was his second case and he's had nine since then. He currently has two cases, and he meets with the teenagers about once a week.

In 2008, Skyler was living with one of his teachers and her husband. His mother had died of a drug overdose when he was 9 years old. He estimates that he moved at least 40 times during his childhood.

After the death of his mom, Skyler entered the foster care system before moving in with a sister he didn't know and her husband. He alleges that he suffered a few instances of physical abuse during his time here.

"With the support of Jim, my friends and the Waltons (the teacher and husband), I got through just knowing they were there," Skyler said. "At first, it's hard for kids in my situation to talk, because it has led to abuse (in the past) or you're too ashamed to talk about it."

Now 20 years old, Skyler is polite, talkative and speaks quickly when reflecting on the importance of having a positive male role model.

"It teaches us how we should act and live," Skyler said, adding that female foster youth also need these role models. "They have no idea that there are men out there that aren't rude, evil or do mean things. There are good men out there."

Coats said taking an interest in someone else's life can deeply impact that person. Through the years, he has offered Skyler advice, but more important, he gives him attention so the young man knows someone cares.

"There's a fear of what you're involving yourself in (as a CASA)," Coats said. "It's not difficult to do what we're doing, to give a bit of yourself. How difficult is it to do that? ... You see so much sadness in the courts. It's nice to bring a bright spot to a child."

Skyler moved to the Bay Area in 2009 to attend the University of California in Berkeley where he is double majoring in rhetoric and legal studies. He works two part-time jobs and this fall will start an internship with a law firm that works to improve the lives of poor children.



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After Skyler turned 18 and was emancipated from the foster care system, he and Coats decided to remain friends. They talk on the phone and e-mail, and Skyler returns to Roseville occasionally to visit his mentor.

"He's the closest to a real father that I have," Skyler said.

Sena Christian can be reached at [senac@goldcountrymedia.com](mailto:senac@goldcountrymedia.com). Follow her on Twitter at [SenaC\\_RsvPT](#).

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**CASA orientation session**

**When:** 6 p.m. Monday, Aug. 1

**Where:** Rocklin Police Department, 4080 Rocklin Road

**What:** Session provides a general overview about the program and a brief introduction of training topics. Topics may include advocacy and the law, court process, roles of the attorney and social worker, cultural awareness and developmental stages/behavioral disorders of youth.

**Training class:** Must be able to attend all classes for 30 hours of training. 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday, Aug. 22, Tuesday, Aug. 23, Monday, Aug. 29, Tuesday, Aug. 30 and Wednesday, Aug. 31.

**Info:** Space is limited. Call (530) 887-1006 or visit [www.casaplacer.org](http://www.casaplacer.org).

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**CASA by the numbers**

- 12 men trained in 2010
- 20 men trained as of July 2011
- On track to train 40 men in 2011

**Keywords**

Court Appointed Special Advocate, foster youth, Roseville High School, Child Advocates of Placer County

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