

Volunteer of the Month

DIANE PINGREE

Reaching out to kids in need

By Kim Palaferri

At the age of 68, Diane Pingree had raised her three children, six grandchildren, and one great-grandson, even watched them go off to college in various directions. Pingree wanted to fulfill a void in her quiet home, so she turned to donating her time at local churches with the Christmas Basket program. Though that was rewarding, she still had a lot of grandmotherly love to share.

"When my kids grew up, I had time I could invest in other families so they could have that same experience as my children did," she said.

Pingree learned of a program that was seeking new volunteers for Child Advocates of Placer County, which runs the Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) program for the Placer County court system.

Her husband of 55 years encouraged her to inquire about a position as a CASA advocate, because she was good with children.

According to CASA's web site (casaplacer.org), the goal of the program is to prevent abused, neglected, and abandoned children from becoming lost in the juvenile dependency system and working to find them safe, permanent homes as soon as possible.

Pingree went through the intensive 30-hour training requirement and completed a full background check to become a CASA volunteer. Currently there are 139 CASA volunteers like Pingree who have dedicated their free time to make a difference in a young person's life.

Sometimes when a family is bro-

CASA

Court Appointed Special Advocates is run by Child Advocates of Placer County. casaplacer.org

ken apart, the child most often needs a person whom they can trust, and who can stand up for the child and voice their concerns. Pingree wanted to be that person, and knew she had something to provide to CASA Kids.

CASA Placer County's primary role is to reunite kids who are victims of child abuse, neglect, or who have parents who struggle with addiction of drugs and/or alcohol.

The purpose of a CASA volunteer is to be "the eyes and ears of the judge and the voice of the child." They are able to do this by submitting court reports and then going to the child's hearing and standing up in court to voice their concerns.

Pingree fulfills that philosophy and adds a little fun with social outings while doing her CASA duties. "I have taken my CASA Kids to the movies, holiday events, and even soccer games at William Jessup University." Pingree said.

Before a child can be returned home, parents are required to attend and complete classes that are offered by Placer County. The criteria for reunification can involve drug counseling, parental classes, and anger management.

A CASA representative will monitor the reunification between the



parent and child for approximately 6 months, until the case is closed.

Pingree said that when a family case has ended, and the family has been reunited again, the duties are not necessarily over. Weekly visits help the child transition back into normalcy.

Pingree's heart is invested into each of her four different CASA Kids cases.

"My first CASA Kid's case closed, and I became a mentor for him," Pingree said. She added that even though the court relationship is over, the work can still continue through mentorship. These days, Pingree enjoys conversations with her first CASA Kid on a social level.

"They like going for milkshakes and sitting down to talk, rather than going for activities like we did while they were CASA Kids," Pingree said.

"You grow to love these children," she added tearfully. Pingree said that her CASA Kids always have a grandmotherly relationship available to them, because she is their unspoken grandma.

CASA Executive Director Don Kleinfelder said Pingree could be, "St. Everyone's Grandmother."

"When I hear her voice in our office, I always put down what I am doing, and head her way for a hug, a smile and a quick bask in her light," Kleinfelder said.