

Transcription of Episode 342: Voices for Children

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SPEAKERS

Bob Geibert, Bob Firing, Jessica Muñoz

Note: This transcription was computer-generated and may contain typographical errors.

Bob Firing 00:09

Good afternoon Shadow Hills. Well, I know that the volunteer record of our residents is truly extraordinary. There are a lot of people who devote an enormous amount of time volunteering in the community. And I have run across an opportunity that you may not have heard about before. And I have two people in here to talk about it. The program is called Voices for Children. And the executive director is Jessica Muñoz. Jessica, welcome to the podcast.

Jessica Muñoz 00:44

Thank you for having me.

Bob Firing 00:45

And my other guest is Bob Geibert, who is an actual volunteer who is working with children now. So Jessica, tell the audience what Voices for Children is and what the volunteers do.

Jessica Muñoz 01:05

I'd be happy to say that Voices for Children is a nonprofit organization that serves as the Court Appointed Special Advocate, or CASA program for Riverside County. CASAs, Court Appointed Special Advocates, are community volunteers who are trained and then supported by Voices for Children to serve as advocates for children in foster care. A lot of people are really surprised that when a child is removed from their home due to abuse or neglect, and enter foster care, the judge is assigned to the child and the family to make all the decisions about what will happen next. And it's those judges that appoint these CASA volunteers that are trained and like I said, supported by Voices for Children.

Bob Firing 01:51

Okay, and what's the typical age of the kids that are in this program?

Jessica Muñoz 01:52

We serve children birth to young adults who are 21 years of age, the most common age range for a child to be referred for a CASA volunteer is about 10 to 14. But we do serve children as young as infants and toddlers and young adults who are preparing to live independently.

Bob Firing 02:18

And so the typical child that's in this program is a child who can't live at home for one reason or another, right?

Jessica Muñoz 02:29

That's right. Typically, when children are brought into foster care, it's because of abuse or neglect they experienced at home, maybe there were issues of drug use, or domestic violence that created a situation where their home environment wasn't safe. And so sometimes children are placed into foster care. Typically, parents are given a chance to participate in services and reunify with their children. We always want that to be the outcome, if that is a safe and healthy option, and then some of the children that we serve, that's not an option for them. Some of those children will be adopted and others will remain in care until they're an adult.

Bob Firing 03:08

Okay, and adult is 18 years old, by the laws definition.

Jessica Muñoz 03:14

That's right. So at 18, when a child in foster care, turns 18 and becomes an adult, in California we're fortunate to have a program called extended foster care. So that young person can choose to remain in foster care until the age of 21, and continue to receive supportive services, we do have CASA volunteers who are working with those young adults, but at 18. It's their choice, and some do exit care.

Bob Firing 03:39

And how many kids are involved in this program.

Jessica Muñoz 03:41

So last year, we served nearly 500 children across Riverside County. A little over 100 of them were from the Coachella Valley.

Bob Firing 03:51

And it's easy for a child to get lost in the system, once they enter it, I understand. And one of the most important things that a CASA does is keep everything on track, correct?

Jessica Muñoz 04:10

Absolutely. That child welfare system is complicated. There are certainly dedicated professionals like the social workers and attorneys who are assigned to the children, the judges who are hearing the cases, but they are responsible for many, many children and families at once. Part of what makes a CASA volunteer really special, especially from the child's perspective, is because they're a volunteer, they're not managing a caseload of children or families. They get to focus typically on one child or one sibling group at a time. Really get to know that young person and spend time with them in a way that the professionals usually aren't able to the quality of conversation you might have while sitting eating ice cream could look very different than a social worker who might be trying to make it to lots and lots of appointments in a single day.

Bob Firing 05:00

Yeah. And so I know you get out of it, what you get put into it. And so Bob, why don't you tell the audience what your experience has been volunteering in this program.

Bob Geibert 05:13

It's been a pretty amazing, an incredible one. The training was amazing, I learned so much about the foster care system that I had absolutely no idea about. Another thing that's really good about the CASA system is the support that we have. We have 24-hour access to an advisor, associate, somebody that's working with us if we have any questions at all, we can get help 24 hours a day. So number of years ago, I decided that my professional life would be with children, and that's what I've done. Now that I'm retired, I had time available to put into a project like the CASA project. So I went through the training, and then I was matched to a young man who at the time was 12 years old. And he lived in the valley. So I was able to see him regularly. We did things like going to Chuckie Cheese, that was one of his favorite things to do. And that's usually what we did. He loved to eat like most adolescents do, especially the boys. And so we would go to buffet afterwards and just talk. And my job was to be his advocate. And that is, to me, the primary thing that I do as a CASA, I'm able by court order, to have access to his school records, I can talk to his teachers, supervisors, anybody at school, to his medical records, I can go to doctor's appointments, psychiatric appointments, whatever the child does, medically. I look at his home environment, we talk about that. If there's any other kinds of things that I might find out, unlike a social worker who's more focused on where's the right environment for this child, et cetera, et cetera. I look at the entire child. And one of the judges says said that the outline of the child has created and I as a CASA colored in. So I might read something in a case file that's kind of disturbing, but as I get to know, the child, I found out that's not them at all. Maybe there was an instance that that happened. But they're a totally different child. So I can give them, every six months, I write a report to the juvenile court, the judge, and I express everything that I have learned. I can give my opinion about what I think should happen next. And I know judges have thanked me individually in court for creating that document because it gives them a picture, a really clear picture, of that child that no one else could provide.

Bob Firing 07:25

So you've been involved with this young man for three years, you say?

Bob Geibert 08:11

No, I met him at age 12, and he will be 17. Very shortly.

Bob Firing 08:16

So five years?

Bob Geibert 08:17

Five years.

Bob Firing 08:17

And, do you have a close . . . describe the relationship that you have.

Bob Geibert 08:23

My relationship with him is a bit different than I hear other CASAs talk about. Many of the classes develop a really close relationship, they talk to their CASA representative, frequently, they just they become very close. Because of my youth's needs his desires to talk or not talk, we didn't have that kind of relationship. But we still had a strong enough relationship, I still talk to him on the phone. He loves technology, loves technology. And so we talked about that. I could give him \$20 maximum gift once a month, if I felt that that would be appropriate. And he often wanted time on online on a Xbox or on some different kind of interactive application. And so that's the gift that he got from me, still gets from me usually, if that's what he asks for.

Bob Firing 09:29

Yeah, well, I understand that the volunteers find it very rewarding. But it there's quite a process involved in becoming trained to become a volunteer, would you describe what that process entails?

Jessica Muñoz 09:44

Of course! So all of our volunteers complete pre-service training course and we call it "Advocate University." Half of that is self-paced so they can do it at home through online modules. And the other half is interactive or live. We now offer that component both in person, as well as in a virtual format. The purpose of Advocate University is to be able to give volunteers like Bob an overview of the foster care system, an understanding of the resources and support that is available to a volunteer as they serve their child, and really lay the foundation to help them get started. As Bob mentioned, all of our CASA volunteers have an advocacy supervisor who is assigned to our volunteers to guide them and assist them and be their right hand along the way. So the training is to help them get started, but we provide individualized support throughout their advocacy.

Bob Firing 10:52

And if this resonates with you, I would like to direct you to look up Voices for Children on YouTube. There are a number of great interviews with both kids and with volunteers who talk about what their experience was. And, like everything, I guess, you get out of it, what you put into it. And but for someone who's motivated along this way, I think that this could be a wonderful opportunity for him. And from what I understand there are hundreds of kids in the county who do not have a volunteer looking after them. Is that correct?

Jessica Muñoz 11:37

That's right. We have more than 100 children on any given day who are waiting for the assignment of a CASA who've been referred to us and many other children that we could certainly serve if we had more wonderful people in the community come and make the kind of commitment that Bob is made to be there for a child that really needs them.

Bob Firing 11:55

Okay, so if this resonates with you, and you would like to get a hold of Jessica, you can certainly just email me at podcast@scshca.com, or Jessica, why don't you give your contact information so people can contact you directly?

Jessica Muñoz 12:12

My pleasure. The best way to learn more about Voices for Children is to visit our website, which is www.speakupnow.org. Or they can give us a call at 951-472-9301.

Bob Firing 12:37

Thank you. Well, thank you for coming in. And I hope that one or two people in this community of 6,000 residents, raise their hand and come out to help you.

Jessica Muñoz 12:49

We'd be so appreciative. Thank you so much.

Bob Firing 12:52

Thanks for coming in and to the audience, until next time, bye bye.