

Jean Harris of Atlantic City is Celebrating 20 Years of Advocating for Children as a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) Volunteer



Either of the following could accurately describe being a very special “*special advocate*”: being a CASA volunteer for more than 20 years or advocating for the well-being of numerous children. Imagine one volunteer advocate having done both! Well, Jean Harris of Atlantic City has been an advocate for more than 20 years, has advocated for more children than she can actually remember (she knows it’s more than 50), and has been an advocate in three different CASA Programs in New Jersey. She is currently advocating in Atlantic County after having done so in Morris and Ocean Counties. Yes, Jean Harris is indeed one very special “*special advocate*.”

And after all this time and so many children, she still remembers her early cases. One very close to her heart was a mother who had been drug addicted for more than 10 years and whose son was removed from the home. As a result of that event, the mother, with Jean’s intervention, successfully completed a drug treatment program, got a job, and found a home. And she had her son returned to her. Even now, Jean wonders what their lives are like and what has become of that boy and his mother.

Jean talks about the need to return children to their mothers and fathers, as if it’s mantra. One senses her joy when talking about the children she’s helped who have been reunited with their biological parents. She related the story of a little girl who was removed from her mom due to substance abuse. The little girl had been placed in a wonderful foster home, with great foster parents. She had her own room, new clothes, and a bicycle to call her own. But what the girl wanted most was to go home to her mother. On visitation days, she would jump out of the car and race toward her mom – nothing else mattered. Eventually, the mother completed her substance abuse treatment and was reunited with her daughter. Jean has been around long enough to know that reunification with the biological family is not always possible and that is why fostering and adopting children is critical to ensuring these children get the loving, safe homes that they deserve.

Because of her experience, Jean is always learning about topics that can affect a family in need including medical day care, family mediation, substance abuse issues and cars. *Cars?* “Teenage boys are always interested in cars,” said Jean, “my husband and I raised two daughters and knew nothing about teenage boys and how hard it was to work with them.” She needed a way to connect and found that all boys, regardless of age, were interested in cars - so Jean learned all that she could.

Jean recalls the words of a young boy she helped many years back, “He said, ‘You’re my voice,’ he knew that I was there for him and looking out for him. Court personnel change, Division of Youth and Family Services case workers can change, all the other players can change, but the CASA has to be consistent. If you can’t make that kind of commitment, there are plenty of other ways to help out a CASA Program, like volunteering in the office, sponsoring an event or serving on a Committee.”

After all these years, Jean has never reconnected with any of the children for whom she advocated, nor the families she helped reunite. She was told early on by her case supervisor that an advocate enters people's lives to help resolve a problem and when it's resolved, you move on. "You can't keep intruding – you step in, do what you can and you step out." And while she would really like to know about several teenagers she advocated for, she thinks that meeting them would be intrusive.

So how will she find out about the kids she's advocated for over the years? "When I go to heaven, I'll see all these kids again." Indeed you will Jean. Indeed you will!

About CASA

CASA and its trained volunteers speak on behalf of abused and neglected children in the family court system. CASA makes certain that children are placed in safe, permanent homes as quickly as possible, helps improve the decision-making ability of Family Court Judges regarding each case and acts as a consistent voice that speaks only on the child's behalf. By matching community volunteer Advocates with children in the system we can ensure that the needs and best interests of these children are met to the fullest extent.