



CELEBRATING 10 YEARS with STORIES

My name is Madeline and I am a CASA Volunteer. I am you.

I have been a CASA Volunteer for only six months, but I feel like I have made a lifetime difference for three young siblings Bella age 10, six-year-old Estevan and Rosa age four.

One morning Bella was beaten so severely with a belt that she was unable to sit down in school. Luckily her teacher took notice and after an inspection by the school nurse it was discovered that Bella was covered in fresh and weeks-old bruises and strap marks from her shoulders to her thighs. The Division of Youth and Family Services (DYFS) was called immediately and soon after all three children were removed from their parents care.

I was assigned to the children's case soon after they entered the foster care system. The siblings, who immigrated from Mexico to the U.S. with their parents two years prior, spoke limited English when they entered the child welfare system and luckily were placed in one of the few Spanish-speaking foster homes in the region. As a Latina, I understood how important being in a Spanish-speaking home was for the children – not just for the language but for all of the unique cultural and traditional characteristics of a Spanish home. For Bella, Estevan and Rosa their foster home was a place where they would identify, be more familiar and comfortable.

When I first visited the children, they were happy and adjusting well to their foster family. They were speaking Spanish with their foster mother and enjoying the same food, culture and traditions that they remembered from home. However I quickly realized that while both Bella and Estevan were strong in their native language, they struggled with even the most basic words written or spoken in English.

I learned from their foster mother that Bella, despite being in the fourth grade, was failing a majority of her subjects in school because she was unable to do her homework. She would become frustrated and refuse to continue – even with the help of her foster mother. Estevan was having similar problems. Despite being in the first grade, he was unable to recognize the letters of the alphabet and his teacher was considering holding him back a year. Even though I knew how important Spanish culture and traditions were to these children – an education was equally important and necessary for them to succeed.

The children's foster mother and I came up with a plan to improve Bella and Estevan's language skills and it started with my visits being conducted in English. On my second visit, I also brought alphabet flash cards for Estevan so we could practice his ABC's. That first day went better than expected. Rosa was reluctant to speak in English at first, but she adjusted quickly. Estevan was elated to see the flash cards and I learned later from his foster mom that he played for hours with the flash cards long after I left.

This was a good start, but I knew that for Bella and Estevan to truly master the English language they would need a tutor from school. So, in my first court report to the Family Court Judge, I recommended Bella and Estevan receive additional education services at their school. The Judge agreed and ordered the services.

I am happy to report that after only six months of additional tutoring Bella, who could barely hold a conversation in English when I met her, is a talkative 11 year-old who can speak nearly perfect English, on her last report card she received all A's and enjoys going to school and doing her homework. Estevan now knows all the letters in the alphabet and is exceeding his teacher's expectations – he will advance to second grade next year. He will happily sing his ABC's for you in the proudest voice a six-year-old can muster. And although Rosa doesn't start school until this month, she has taken an interest to learning too. In fact, Estevan has been teaching her the alphabet using his flash cards!

Although my time as Bella, Estevan and Rosa's CASA Volunteer has been brief, I know that in the lives of these children the last six months have been invaluable. I have watched them flourish in their Spanish-speaking foster home and, most importantly at school. I have witnessed their individual achievements in finally understanding and completing homework and being able to communicate with school mates and other neighborhood children. Bella, Estevan, and even Rosa, are more confident now than the terrified children who were removed from their home less than a year ago. I am proud to say that I was a part of that transformation from scared child to self-assured student. I know that I had a hand in putting them on the path to reach their highest potential - I don't want to imagine the story ending any other way.

Bella, Estevan and Rosa's story is just one among the 700 children who are in the foster care system in Atlantic and Cape May Counties. Many more children have stories like Bella's, Estevan's and Rosa's who need a helping hand. Will you help lift up their voice? To donate to CASA or to volunteer please call (609) 601-7800 or visit www.atlanticapecasa.org.