



CELEBRATING 10 YEARS with STORIES

My name is Kelley and I am a CASA volunteer. I am you.

People say I have always been a “natural volunteer.” Ever since I was a little girl, volunteering has given me pride and a sense of accomplishment. As I have grown older, I have spent countless hours helping out in soup kitchens or folding clothes for the local homeless shelter. It wasn’t until I stumbled upon CASA many years ago, that I found my calling as a community volunteer.

Once my CASA training was completed, I saw the fractured lives of struggling parents and their children. In my first few cases it was sometimes impossible to witness the shattered lives of the innocent children and help them find a breath of hope amongst the chaos. But it was always the end result – ensuring a teenage boy didn’t have to face the pain of separation from his siblings or finding a forever family for a little brown-eyed girl named Christina – that made the countless hours spent on their cases well worth my time. The biggest reward is hearing a child’s heartfelt thank you and experiencing the humble gratitude of birth, foster and adoptive parents.

But, it is the case of 12-year-old Cat that continues to remind me why I volunteer with CASA. Cat was born into violence and chaos. Brutally abused by her mother and her multiple boyfriends, Cat entered the foster care system at the age of 18 months. Cat lived in the foster care system for over 3 years before she was adopted at the age of 5 by a well-meaning and loving woman named Margaret. What should have been a happy start to Cat’s new forever family quickly made a turn for the worse when Cat’s adoptive mother began to suffer from severe mental illness by the time Cat was 6 years old.

Margaret became paranoid and delusional, believing the FBI was out to get her family. Her paranoia became so severe that she barricaded their home from outsiders and taught Cat to be fearful of the world. While her adoptive mother struggled to fight her own inner demons, Cat’s life spun out of control. At the age of 10, Cat dealt with her mother’s mental illness and her own feelings of confusion and hopelessness by cutting raw welts into her delicate arms. She wrote in her journal about her fears, blaming herself for her past abuse and feeling as though she was friendless and powerless. When Cat was 12, she was removed from her adoptive home due to allegations that her mother was neglecting her and not providing her with adequate care.

This is when I met Cat – a confused, frightened and damaged 12-year-old girl. I didn’t know what to expect of a child who had been through so much. But once I met her I realized she was just like any little girl – she loved to play hop scotch, listen to music and have “girl-talk.” I love to see the light burst into her eyes when she talks of whales and sharks or challenges me to go jump on the trampoline – in heels.

In those first few visits, I saw how much Cat missed her mother. She was seeing Margaret once every two weeks for two hours. Cat expressed to me the love she had for her mother and how she wished she could see her more often. I asked the Judge to increase Cat's visitation time and soon after the Judge ordered the recommendation, Cat's attitude and behavior improved in school and in her foster home.

As the case continued, I still advocated for more visitation and therapy for both Cat and Margaret. Unfortunately, like any real life story, roadblock after roadblock popped up, dashing hopes that this family would ever be brought together again. Margaret repeatedly refused to be evaluated, not wanting anyone to intrude in her life. Cat's journey through foster care proved perilous and I watched helplessly, despite my recommendations, as she was moved to three consecutive placements – this instability tore Cat apart, and, eventually, she began cutting deep gashes in her arms again.

The life of a 12-year-old should be carefree. But for Cat, foster care took from her a childhood and replaced it with uncertainty and disappointment. I knew I need to find a safe place for this troubled young girl. So I continued to advocate on Cat's behalf and soon the hard work started to pay off. I advocated for Cat to be placed in a treatment facility where professionals could help her cope with her depression and suicidal thoughts. Once moved, I saw a happier 12-year-old who was rewarded for expressing herself. Just after a few months in her new home, Cat transformed, becoming more outspoken and expressing her needs. Even Cat's mother was impressed with her improvement and agreed to be evaluated as well.

I wish I could say this story has a happy ending with Cat and Margaret becoming a family again. But, alas, this is not a case. Their story still remains open – Cat living at the treatment facility and Margaret beginning to recognize what it will take to be reunified with her daughter. Regardless, I do feel that my actions on Cat's behalf have helped stabilize her life. I've been there for her through three placements, four DYFS case workers and countless therapists – remaining the only constant voice in her life.

Recently, when visiting Cat in her treatment home, she quietly pulled me aside. In a polite voice, she asked if I would take a handwritten letter to the Judge. Of course I obliged. This letter, written entirely by Cat, was full of her little quirks and heartfelt feelings pleading with the Judge to let her go home again. The fact that this little girl – who as once confused and frightened by a difficult system – was now able to express herself and trust me enough to deliver her message brought a glimmer of hope to me. This is what it means to be a CASA volunteer. This is what it means to make a difference in someone's life story.

Cat'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, who have stories like Cat's, need a helping hand. Will you lift up their voice? To donate to CASA or to volunteer please call (609) 601-7800 or visit www.atlanticcapecasa.org