



# CELEBRATING 10 YEARS with STORIES

***My name is Jean and I am a CASA Volunteer. I am you.***

My story began 21 years ago when I was selected as Treasurer of the Morris County CASA Board of Trustees, a program that I had helped establish three years earlier in 1987. Since then, I have advocated for more children than I can actually remember at three different CASA programs: Morris County CASA, CASA of Ocean County and most recently, CASA of Atlantic and Cape May Counties.

I remember many of my cases, especially the early ones. One small boy removed from the custody of his drug-addicted mother, another little girl who was placed in the system because her parents abandoned her, a set of twins who were found during a drug raid malnourished and bruised. Each family story that I became a part of, each child that I advocated for changed my life – and I know that I have changed their lives too. I have helped neglected children find loving, permanent homes, helped drug-addicted mothers get counseling so they can have their children back and helped fathers get visitation. I have seen first-hand the effects that family turmoil has on a child and that is why, after 21 years, I still volunteer my time because these children need someone and I have chosen to be that someone.

Since moving to southern New Jersey, I have advocated for 15 children. One of those children still stands out in my mind - a tiny infant with dark, thick hair who we will call Hector.

One day while I was in court for another case I heard Hector's tragic story and knew that I wanted to help this child find a loving home. Hector's mother had heavily abused drugs while she was pregnant so Hector was born 5 weeks premature, weighed only 4 pounds and was also addicted – he was her sixth child. His addiction and subsequent withdrawal made him so medically fragile that, days after he was born he sustained an infection so traumatic that part of his intestine had to be removed. Hector's medical condition was so complicated and required advanced treatment and care that he spent almost the first full year of his life in a hospital because a specialized medical foster home was not available for him at the time.

Thankfully, I was appointed Hector's CASA volunteer nearly one year after his birth in December 2009. Once assigned to Hector's case, I immediately met Hector and his treatment team at the hospital. They explained Hector's multiple medical conditions that required a

feeding tube and around the clock care and how difficult it is to find a foster home for a child with so many special needs. I learned quickly of his mother's struggle with heroin and cocaine addiction, she was in and out of treatment more times than I could count – each new inpatient stint promised to be the one that would help her, but sadly, none of them ever did. Her visitation with her son Hector was just as sporadic, often going months without seeing him.

After reading through a year's worth of court reports and talking to everyone involved in the boy's life I noticed that Lauren, a nurse from the hospital where Hector stayed, had expressed an interest in caring for the boy on a permanent basis. Lauren was a Certified Nurse Assistant and had developed a strong bond with Hector during his year-long stay at the hospital. I quickly brought this to the attention of Hector's Division of Youth and Family Caseworker and the courts and by April 2010 Lauren began to receive specific training on how to care for Hector and was applying to the Division to be certified as a resource home. By July 2010, Lauren was Hector's official foster parent and he was finally out of the hospital after living there for 28 months.

Hector has thrived in Lauren's care. He is enrolled in Medical Day Care and his teachers describe him "as a friendly, bright child who has assimilated in the group experience." Even Hector's doctors are pleased with the progress he has made under Lauren's care, especially the fact that he started eating solid foods, relying much less on his feeding tube.

By October 2010, Hector's mother surrendered her parental rights. Hector is still living with Lauren, who will adopt the boy when all of the court proceedings are completed.

Knowing that I had a hand in finding this child a loving, permanent home is a rewarding experience. But I sometimes wonder what would have happened if I hadn't been in court that day and heard Hector's case. Would he have found his forever family with Lauren or would he have languished in a long-term medical facility, not ever knowing a mother or a home? Thankfully, for Hector's sake, we won't ever know.

*Hector'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 Hector'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.atlanticcapecasa.org](http://www.atlanticcapecasa.org).*