



CASA: A Unique Volunteer Opportunity

By Gene Murphy

When Don Baillie retired in 2014 from Intel, he had no set agenda. In his words, "I was going to let retirement find me." The birth of his granddaughter led him to CASA.



Don and son Austin hiking the Grand Canyon "Letting retirement find him" .

Having spent 30 years in Production Planning and IT at the Intel Oregon sites, Don Baillie decided to decompress during that first year. He spent his time hiking, kayaking and doing other similar activities. However, after a year he felt it was time to find a way to serve others and to connect more with his community. It was then that he found the CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocate) organization. Actually he says the birth of his granddaughter was the key event that eventually led him to it.

Watching her he realized how critical early childhood development is and that not all children are fortunate enough to have good parenting at the time, when they are most vulnerable. He was already somewhat familiar with CASA, having read about it before he retired. It piqued his interest. After a little more research, including an information session conducted by CASA for Children, he decided during January, 2016 that he would volunteer to become a child advocate with this organization. He felt that this would be a meaningful and important way for him to give something back to his community.



Don and his wife, Shirley, visiting NYC in 2015



What is CASA? It's a national organization that is managed at the county level. Don's particular organization serves Multnomah, Washington and Columbia Counties in Oregon, <http://www.casahelpskids.org>. The Court Appointed Special Advocate reports to a judge in a juvenile dependency case that involves abuse or neglect of a child. The CASA is the voice of the child and advocates for his or her best interests. Although the children have their own attorney and a DHS (Department of Human Services) caseworker assigned to them, these people typically have large caseloads and are unable to provide the attention that a CASA can give.

CASAs have four roles: Investigate, Advocate, Facilitate and Monitor. Activities include talking to people in the child's life, looking for helpful services that could be recommended to the court, pushing for more rigorous medication management, or facilitating contacts to ensure a smooth school transition for children with special educational needs. The CASA must submit a report to the court prior to each review hearing, which occurs every 3-4 months during the average 18-24 months of a case.



Graduation at CASA

There is a state and federal mandate, which requires that a CASA be assigned to every child involved in a juvenile dependency case; however, there is a critical shortage of advocates. Don says that there are only enough volunteers in his area to cover about a third of the cases. Therefore, he says judges assign CASAs only to the most difficult cases where they feel they will yield the most benefit. When he joined CASA, Don volunteered to be an advocate in rural Columbia County, which has been able to cover only 18% of the current cases. It was there he felt he could have the most impact.

Don's case involves two children, who are currently assigned to a foster home. He maintains contact with teachers, doctors, birth parents and foster parents. By doing this he is able to provide a consistent and detailed information flow to the court. In other words he becomes "the eyes and ears for the judge". Don says that the desired outcome for a case would be that the natural parents demonstrate that they are trustworthy and can provide a safe and supportive home for the child.



Don at a CASA board meeting

From a personal standpoint, Don's takeaways from CASA are the gratification of being a positive contributor for the children's situation and developing a real personal connection with them, which isn't always easy to do. He also feels that some of the skills that he learned at Intel serve him well as a CASA. Specifically, he believes that to be successful at Intel you need to become a good facilitator who can work effectively with different groups. Likewise, a CASA must coordinate and reconcile the various agendas that different people who are involved in a case may have. He also says that

Constructive Confrontation has served him well as a CASA. Since a volunteer can only exert indirect influence, this technique allows him to keep advancing his case, hopefully to an eventual successful conclusion.

Don says that he finds being a CASA very gratifying; however, he's also realistic about his expectations for success. In other words, small steps forward may be what are defined as success in a case. He realizes his influence on others is often not immediately evident. It takes time to see results from the seeds that are planted.

If you want to learn more about CASA or the process to become a volunteer, you can find contact information for your local agency on the national web site at <http://www.casaforchildren.org>. Also if you want to get a more personal idea about the organization, you can contact Don at dgb.casa@gmail.com.