

CASA Success Story - Winter 2013 Georgia CASA Connector E-Newsletter

Roseann Hooper was surprised to see a delivery driver headed to the front door of her Savannah home bearing a brightly wrapped houseplant.

“It wasn’t my birthday, not my anniversary, I thought, who could be sending me a gift? But then I saw the five pink carnations tucked into the plant’s pot, and I knew before I opened the card, which read: ‘Thank you for everything, ~The White Family.’ ”

It had been one year since Roseann, a volunteer with Savannah/Chatham County CASA, first met the family—five children ranging in age from 5 to 16 years old.

The children came into care in June 2012. Their mother—avoiding a court hearing in her home state of Florida—had driven her five children to Savannah. When she was questioned in a park by police for odd behavior, she and the children gave false names, leaving the authorities no choice but to take everyone into custody.

“It was scary,” says Selina, the oldest of the children. “The FBI interrogated us for nearly four hours. I had no idea what was going on. It was like an out-of-body experience.”

The mother was arrested for obstruction of justice, and returned to Florida to face additional charges. The children were placed in three different foster and group homes. Roseann would come to Selina’s group home each week, when the siblings were all brought together for weekly visits.

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“My biggest concern was that the children were separated—and would remain separated if they stayed in foster care,” Roseann says today.

Enter the children’s grandparents, Lou and Marie White. The children had been living with the Whites in Florida until their mother regained custody and fled the state. The grandparents were eager to take the children back to Florida, to give them a permanent, loving home. While most were in agreement that the children should be returned to their care, when the mother brought the children across state lines she added layers of complex regulations to the legal proceedings.

Complicated by paperwork discrepancies, misunderstandings and some debate about what was in the best interests of the children, the case dragged on. Every month, the grandparents made the five-hour drive from their home near Orlando to Savannah to attend yet another court hearing. On each trip, they drove a vehicle large enough to transport all five children and their belongings home. Month after month they drove the empty van home.

“Every hearing, every holiday, people would say, “You are going home soon,” but then we wouldn’t,” says Selina.

Roseann was in constant contact with the grandparents, who would sometimes email or call her every day. Five hours away, they felt powerless and isolated. Roseann kept them informed about the latest proceedings. And she kept the children hopeful.

“Mrs. Hooper was our main supporter, our number-one fan, someone that was always there,” says Selina. Even though others doubted us, and some did not expect us to go home, she always insisted that we needed to be together, with our family. If it wasn’t for Mrs. Hooper I would not be home, honestly. I think I would be in a group home or a foster home.”

In June 2012, after five months of trials and separation, a judge determined to resolve the case took all of the parties into her chambers and made a conference call to Atlanta. Court staff in Georgia located the necessary paperwork and faxed it off to the judge. The children were summoned into the chamber and told the good news that they would be going home—today.

“There was not a dry eye in the room,” says Roseann. “Especially mine.”