

As a CASA volunteer, I want to let you know about my first case involving a young girl I will call Susan. Susan came into the custody of the State of NM as a result of a complaint of neglect. A beautiful blonde, blue-eyed little girl, at age 3 ½ she was found wandering her neighborhood unsupervised at night. Investigation by Social Services revealed an unkempt home, cluttered with prescription pills, loose leaf tobacco, spoiled food and animal feces. It was deemed lacking in proper supervision and unsafe for Susan so she was removed and placed in foster care. Her father was not home and she was being left in the care of a boyfriend while the mother went to work.

When Susan came into custody she had little or no intelligible speech and had little ability to form appropriate emotional attachments. She was not toilet trained and had frequent accidents. Initially she exhibited a fear of men and sometimes exhibited sexualized behavior. She was very thin and ate very little. Her mother, while cooperating with Social Services' requests to clean her home and making extensive efforts to visit Susan on a regular basis, seemed unable to grasp the severity of the delays in her development. This was the second time she had come to the attention of Social Services and previously she had relinquished custody of other children.

I became Susan's CASA volunteer shortly before her fourth birthday. At first, Susan talked and interacted very little with me or any of the other adults. Once she was placed in foster care, her emotional and social skills began improving. She began talking more, although it was still fairly difficult to understand her. When I visited, we read books, blew bubbles, colored and practiced writing her name. Each time I went I would reintroduce myself and she soon came to know who I was, but when I asked her my name she would not say anything. I can still remember the first time she called my name. I was ecstatic. A tiny but important connection had been made.

During the ensuing 3 years, Susan was in 5 foster placements. Her social and emotional development continued to improve. By this time, Susan was attending preschool. As a CASA, I continued to visit her weekly, contacted her therapists, foster parents, social workers and teachers. In addition, we continued to enjoy time together, reading, playing games and baking cookies. As a CASA volunteer it was my responsibility to report to the court on Susan's behalf. Several times a year I submitted written reports and attended court. I think one of the most important functions I also did was to simply take pictures of Susan. As an adoptive mother, I know how important it was to have pictures as Susan grew for the permanent family she would someday have. Even her biological mother did not do that and I provided photos to her as well hoping to strengthen their bond. During this time, Susan had numerous changes of therapists, social workers, foster parents, teachers and other treatment providers. As her CASA volunteer, I was one person that was a constant through these changes.

Despite ongoing visits and attempts to teach her mother appropriate supervision and care for her daughter, Susan's mother was unable to provide a safe and stable home for her and her parental rights were eventually terminated. Attempts began to find Susan a permanent home even before she was legally free to be adopted but they seemed to fall apart when prospective families discovered that she was not immediately available to be adopted. At times, I felt frustrated with how long the process was taking and how prospective adoptive parents withdrew once they discovered Susan was not yet legally free. Repeatedly I expressed this in my court reports. Judge Price responded by setting specific deadlines and doing everything in her power to move the process to a conclusion.

In the meantime, Susan completed kindergarten and found herself back in the Childhaven shelter due to funding constraints that ended her foster care treatment. Just when it seemed things were most hopeless, the family that had adopted Susan's half siblings reentered the picture and said that they would consider adopting her as well. Within weeks, Susan was meeting her half brothers and sister. It was amazing to see this little girl who had been diagnosed as having difficulty making emotional bonds make an immediate connection. The family welcomed her with open arms, and she seemed to fit from the first time she met them. They made her a permanent part of her family within months.

For me the most exciting moment came as I kept in touch with her by phone several months later. Seeing my name, her parents allowed her to answer the phone when I called. I fought back tears as the little girl who initially couldn't remember my name and who I hadn't talked to for over a month, said "Hi Judy" recognizing my voice immediately. That is the best reward I could have asked for. It's what being a CASA volunteer is all about.