

## Detective Turned Advocate Keeps Fighting for Children

Some of us keep our big, open heart tucked inside, while others show it freely. As soon as Marta walked in the door, I could see her big, open heart was shown freely. Marta is retired from a career as a detective for the Juvenile Bureau investigating crimes against children. Rather than becoming hardened or burnt out by what must have been a challenging job, Marta wanted to continue helping children in crisis in her retirement.



She was searching for an organization to volunteer where she could make a difference. One day, she opened a newspaper and saw a CASA ad so she signed up to learn more.

What she found out was that a child 'in the system' will go through several judges, case workers, foster homes, lawyers, therapists and schools. *But the one CASA will remain as their own until they find a forever home.* In fact, sometimes the CASA is the only person in that child's life that does not go away. It was then that Marta knew that becoming a CASA volunteer was for her.



As a detective, Marta was trained to interview abused and neglected children. It was difficult to hear their stories, but she was also trained to keep her emotions in check, "I was motivated by the results for the child. Children don't want to be separated from their parents – no matter the abuse. Children are torn between wanting to be safe and wanting to stay with their parents. I was highly motivated to protect the children and enforce the law upon the abuser."

Her job as a detective was well defined: Save the child's life. Gather details. File charges against the abuser. Once those things were accomplished, her job was done. "I never saw the children after that."

As a CASA volunteer, she picks up where her old job left off. She fights for the child. Whatever that child needs, Marta will be there to assist.

Marta knew that children living in the foster care system have no consistency, she had seen it first-hand. Separation from their parents, and often from their siblings, is traumatic for a child at any age. They often feel like nobody cares and there is nobody to trust. But in the case of three siblings assigned by CASA to Marta two years ago, they now had a CASA to trust, to lean on, to turn to.

"When I met my 3-year-old, he didn't talk at all. Now two years later, because of speech therapy that I recommended and that was ordered by the courts, he hasn't stopped talking," Marta laughingly says with great pride.

"My 7-year-old missed his family so much, all he did was cry. I played with him during visits and in time he opened up to me. Because he trusted me, he told me about his problems in school. Further discussions with his teacher and foster mother revealed that he most-likely needed glasses. Within a few weeks, he had glasses," Marta said.

"My 13-year-old had assumed the role of parent to her younger siblings. She is now being taught to be a teenager again and shares many thoughts with me. She just told me something she had not told anybody else. I am so grateful that she did because I was able to get her the help she needed."

"I know that if not for my CASA relationship with these wonderful children, their paths in life could have been so different," Marta said.

Happy endings do happen. All three of Marta's siblings are now living with family, the boys with their biological fathers and the girl with her grandmother. With the support of CASA and the courts, the fathers were given the resources and knowledge to provide safe homes for their children. They were also directed to services to support them in their role as a father.

Why take on the role of CASA? Marta finds reward in making a difference in the child's life, "I love to be a part of the decision process." She appreciates the respect judges give to CASA - 93% of the time, judges implement CASA recommendations. "After all the hard work is done, you see your efforts unfold to help a child. The judges actually rely on our reports and listen to us. It's very rewarding."

When I asked Marta what she thinks makes a good CASA, she highlighted these traits: Care and compassion; Emotional strength; Persistence; Assertiveness; Goal focused; Be a fighter when the child needs a fighter; and most importantly; Commitment to saving a life - changing the direction of a child in crisis.

An 18 month or 2-year commitment can sound like a lot. Marta said, "Realistically though, after the first 6 months of information gathering and navigating an overburdened foster care system (that's where the persistence comes in), the time commitment can often just be visits with your child and a court date every three months.

"CASA has definitely helped me grow as a person. Instead of just gathering information as I did as a detective, I go to the end. You care more. Before I was focused on the perpetrator. Now, it's long term - to safety and love. It's very rewarding."

In Marta's words, *"I am a CASA. I am the one who holds the child's heart and their desires for their future. They tell their heart's desire to me and I try to make it happen. These children remember the person who cared and supported their future."*

The law keeps a child alive. But it's caring people that make the child whole again.

So whether we share our big hearts freely or keep them tucked inside, and whether our life experience comes from a career as a detective or a teacher or a mom or dad, it's the caring for the heart of the child that makes a CASA and that makes all the difference.



***Celebrating 15 Years of Fighting for Children's Rights***

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