

CASA Volunteers are the Calm in the Storm

Lauren Suit, of Allegra Marketing, Print & Mail

Zoey didn't know the joy of opening Christmas presents, the anticipation of putting a lost tooth under her pillow for the Tooth Fairy or the peace of returning to a stable home after a day at school. Her earliest memories were of abuse and neglect. Those missing pieces were gradually put back together by her foster/adoptive family and the efforts of a CASA volunteer.



"From the moment she walked into our lives, she just fit," said mom Lindsey. "Despite what she had been through, her joy was contagious."

Lindsey and her husband Brad's home is now full of life and laughter of six children. However, three of their kids were considered as only a number on a case file until CASA Bonnie came into their lives.

Lindsey and Brad first met Bonnie, who volunteers as a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA), when the family was navigating the foster care system as they welcomed Zoey, their first foster child into their life.



At home with Mom Lindsey

"Bonnie gave Zoey a voice," said Lindsey. "Her presence and her dedication made sure that Zoey was seen as a child who needed help, a real living person, and not just another piece of paper to be filed."

Lindsey explained that CASA Bonnie's role is to be a voice in court for children removed from their homes due to abuse or neglect. These advocates speak up for these children, help them get the services they need and ensure that they find safe, permanent homes.

Lindsey, who works as a guidance counselor at local elementary school, said that she and her husband had talked about wanting to explore foster care in addition to their three birth children; Eva, Charlie and Ben, but when then six-year-old Zoey needed emergency placement, they jumped into the foster care system with both feet.

"The system is a whirlwind of case workers, attorneys, paperwork, court dates and deadlines," said Lindsey. "When Bonnie was referred to us, we had already gone through two different case workers and two attorneys."

The foster care system is hard, but it is to be expected when you are dealing with a child's welfare, Lindsey noted. However, very few case workers have the time to even explain the legal lingo of the system, let alone provide families with the support that they need.

"Bonnie humanized the process," she added. "She had time to answer questions when the case workers couldn't. She was there for us, but more importantly, she was there for Zoey."

In 2015, Zoey was officially adopted by the family. Lindsey said that after that case, CASA Bonnie, who had already retired from her career as a teacher, was ready to retire from her volunteer CASA duties. Lindsey joked that she pulled CASA Bonnie from retirement when two additional children - Jayden, who is now nine, and her sister Janelle, now five months, entered the foster care system and literally ended up on Lindsey's front doorstep.

"Even though we essentially entered the foster care system in a backwards way, we wouldn't change a thing," said Lindsey. "It is so amazing that we can fill a void in a child's life with magic. Some get to experience holidays, birthday parties, music classes and even the tooth fairy for the first time."

In addition to advocating for children in court through their reports, CASA volunteers have the benefit of being able to bond with the kids they represent through monthly visits and their activities. In fact, when Zoey and Amy take the stage in a community stage production, CASA Bonnie will be in the audience ready to give them a standing ovation.

Throughout the family's experience with CASA volunteers, Lindsey said that her mother, who had recently retired from her job as an administrative assistant at a local university, was inspired to become a CASA volunteer. Lindsey said that her mother, like all CASA volunteers, go through training in everything from the relationship building process to how to write reports for court.

"A CASA volunteer has a true opportunity to change a child's life," said Lindsey. "To a child, they are like a lifeboat in the middle of a storm."

**Names have been changed to respect the privacy of the foster children involved.*



Zoey, after her adoption



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