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CASA volunteers giving a voice to the children of Atlantic and Cape May counties

Julio Mendez For The Press

Dec 14, 2022



CASA volunteer Bonnie Zatyko, a retired teacher, with three of the children she used to advocate for in foster care: Zoey Zabelski, 15; Maya Zabelski, 15; and Violet Zabelski, 6.

MATTHEW STRABUK, FOR THE PRESS

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CASA volunteer Bonnie Zatyko, a retired teacher, with three of the children she used to advocate for who were in foster care.

What better way to celebrate the true spirit of the season than providing at-risk children with safety and permanency? The gift of adoption and family reunification gives a child the true sense of security and belonging.

The Atlantic-Cape May Vicinage of the N.J. Superior Court celebrated National Adoption Day on Nov. 18 at the Atlantic City Civil Courthouse. This year the vicinage will finalize the adoptions of 15 children. That's the happiest day of the year in the courthouse.

The goals of National Adoption Day are to raise awareness of the more than 100,000 children in out-of-home placement in the United States, and to celebrate the loving families who open their hearts and homes to an adoptive child.

National Adoption Day provided an opportunity to highlight and acknowledge the good work of all components of the child protection system. With an emphasis on family preservation, the New Jersey Child Protection framework has made significant improvements and is becoming a national model.

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Granting an adoption of a child and achieving reunification with biological families are most rewarding accomplishments. In these difficult cases, having a CASA volunteer is essential. CASA stands for Court Appointed Special Advocates.

Judges often appoint CASA volunteers in child protection cases. CASA volunteers visit the children and get to know them. CASA volunteers work hard to get a full picture of the situation and make recommendations to the judge.

The overriding principles in a child protection case are child safety and permanency. Achieving permanency is always a cause to celebrate whether through adoption or when children can safely return home.

New Jersey courts have established an exceptional children-in-court framework. The Atlantic-Cape May Vicinage has three judges devoted to managing child safety cases, assisted by a committed family court staff.

Children-in-court judges are the gatekeepers of the child protection cases. Every day these dedicated judges enter orders to safeguard the safety and permanency of children, upholding the rights of all involved and ensuring compliance with state and federal law.

Judges that handle this very challenging docket perform exceptional public service.

Ideally every child in out-of-home placement should have a CASA advocate. CASA volunteers do not get pay. Their main goal is to protect and help children. They are community heroes. They make a huge positive impact in the lives of children and families.

Being a CASA volunteer is hard work, but also very rewarding.

CASA of Atlantic County provides extraordinary service; their volunteers often go the extra mile to make a difference. CASA advocates provide a caring, objective presence for a child.

They often attend court proceedings, visit the child in their placement, make medical and school visits, and provide a voice for the needs of the child and family.

CASA advocates, caseworkers, attorneys, law guardians and family court staff all play important roles in child protection cases. The system ensures legal representation to all parents, and each child is represented by a law guardian. These lawyers perform extraordinary work.

National Adoption Day was a day to celebrate. Let us celebrate the 15 children getting the gift of adoption in Atlantic County, and all children everywhere in New Jersey and across the nation getting a forever family.

Let us also celebrate the positive changes to the New Jersey child welfare system increasing the number of family reunifications.

Let us all thank the extraordinary CASA volunteers giving a voice to the children of Atlantic and Cape May counties. In this season of giving, if you're looking to serve or give to a worthwhile organization, CASA should be on your list.

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