



April 26, 2023

Dear Legislators,

I have been wanting to write something to show my appreciation for CASA. I asked Janet where I should send it and she mentioned there was some legislation coming up and I should send it to you. I hope it is helpful in some way and, at the very least, I feel it important to put into words how much CASA has meant to my family. **

I would like to begin with a short summary of my family's situation in order to better illustrate just how invaluable CASA's presence has been in our lives.

I am the maternal aunt to three amazing young people, two of which entered the foster care system in December of 2021. I maneuvered myself into a position to take them, knowing their removal was imminent. My sister became a barrier to their well-being and health and her daughter and I made a very difficult choice.

It wasn't simply a matter of right or wrong as ethically, their removal was certainly the right thing to do. The heart and the mind aren't always in tandem and what we know and how we feel don't always reconcile. To let my sister go in order to secure her children's well-being is the most difficult decision I've ever made. Having to oppose her in order to help its facilitation was nothing less than soul crushing.

The emotional trauma of essentially losing my sister had an impact on all of us. As the now parental figure, I needed to primarily conceal my own feelings and aftershocks of trauma in order to be the pillar of security they needed. Both boys experience Autism and are very sensitive to even the most subtle emotional nuance. I had to be careful.

The initial whirlwind after a child's removal is difficult to describe to someone who hasn't experienced the process first-hand. There are a myriad of appointments, a truckload of new responsibilities and the revolving door of various state workers making their visits.

With these boys in particular, there were also sleepless nights coupled with night terrors (and behaviors). If they were up, I was up and sleep deprivation makes everything more difficult. I had to go on leave from my job in order to remain intact and coherent enough to do everything that was needed.

I refer to CASA as the anti-DHS. I don't intend this to be an inflammatory statement but simply one of fact. I have experienced the poignant difference between a person's, shall we say, work ethic when their heart dictates their presence in your life as opposed to a paycheck.

It's not a secret to anyone who has ever been involved with DHS (Or keeps up on current news and events) that it comes with its share of problems. Under staffing, lack of training, and oftentimes a lack of perspective creates sizable gaps in their level of direct support and clear communication.

My personal experience lies with a CASA worker by the name of Janet Pierce. Throughout this arduous process, she has taken the time and effort to familiarize herself with our family and what is important to each youth. She has not only scooped up the ball that has been so frequently dropped by DHS but has run the entire field in order to support the desires and needs of my nephews.

My youngest nephew had been kept out of school for nearly four years before he came to live with me. His greatest wish was to return and reclaim a life that had been taken from him. The obstacles to this task bordered on the realm of ridiculous. It was two months before the end of the school year and it seemed as though we were being put off in order to delay his attendance until the following year.

Janet accepted the challenge. It was she who called multiple educators and administrators for the district. She firmly asserted that it was important he return to school even if it was only for a week. She maintained that the time of year was irrelevant and it was everyone's responsibility to do everything possible in order to facilitate his return to normalcy. It was Janet who ferreted out the binding tendrils of red tape and took steps to secure the documentation needed for his return and delivered it to the school herself.

This is only one example of CASA's support for our family. On numerous occasions, Janet has offered herself as a sounding board when I began feeling overwhelmed or frustrated. Her calm presence and wise perspective helped keep my head above water. I'm not sure I would have remained afloat without her continued and consistent support.

She has shared in our triumphs and remembers even the smallest details regarding the boys including their respective birthdays. This might seem a trivial thing but their DHS worker has not recognized either boy on their birthday. This acknowledgment from Janet meant the world to them.

Our story is not uncommon. Throughout the country and especially in Oregon, drug abuse has ripped apart countless families. Active addiction and the resulting neglect is a difficult dynamic to grasp for an adult, much less a young child. Oftentimes, all they know is that the parent they love is gone and they find themselves in a new environment with (hopefully) family but sometimes strangers.

Displaced children need and most certainly deserve as much attention and support as possible. CASA provides this while also filling the holes left by DHS. They are volunteering their time for an undertaking much more substantial than it might appear on paper.

Time is a non-renewable asset. One minute. Ten minutes. A day. Once time passes, it has been irrevocably spent because we can never get it back. Any person or organization willing to give their time without anything in return is one to be both recognized and applauded. It is so very needed by children who are craving any action of the heart. They know. Intuition is a powerful thing.

I might have summarized by simply stating the following. I will end with a snippet of actual dialogue that also helps illustrate my point.

Me: "Hey, Janet's coming by this afternoon after school."

Nephew: "Oh, Yay!"

Me: "Hey, *** is coming by this afternoon after school."

Nephew: "Who?"

Me: "Your DHS worker."

Nephew. "Oh."

Forever grateful,

Jeannette Kenmoen