

Ken and Tessa became volunteer Court Appointed Special Advocates in the spring of 2018. Soon after swearing-in, the married couple decided to take on a group of four siblings and advocate for them together as a team. Their timing could not have been better as siblings Zane, Isaac, Serina, and Maria entered foster care that same spring and CASAs Ken and Tessa were able to jump in and become steady and safe adults on the case from the beginning. At the time of their removal, Zane was 10 years-old, Isaac 7, Serina 5, and Maria 2. The four siblings were removed from the care of their biological parents after Child Protective Services found the youngest children in the care of their mother, father, and aunt, all of whom had been using methamphetamine and alcohol while supervising the kids. Domestic violence was another serious concern for the safety of the home.



The CASAs began to visit the kids regularly and got to know the children on an individual basis, beginning to paint a picture of each child's unique needs and wants. They also met with the biological parents who were working with Child Protective Services to address their substance abuse and ongoing domestic violence. Zane and Isaac, the two oldest children, began to struggle in school and had frequent emotional outbursts throughout the day, interrupting their studies and their ability to have healthy friendships with other students. The CASAs began to meet with the boys' teachers, counselors, and school administrators to figure out a plan to help the boys regulate their behavior and emotions throughout the school day. Together, they came up with a set of goals for the boys with rewards for achieved milestones. Slowly, the boys began to find healthy and appropriate ways of expressing their stress and their feelings. The CASAs were also able to advocate for the two younger girls, Serina, and Maria. As Serina started school, Ken and Tessa made sure that she had the support and services she needed to transition into this new environment. They also brought Serina's ongoing need for speech therapy to address a speech impediment to the attention of the court. The CASAs played an important role in getting two-year-old Maria into a daycare program where she could be around kids her own age and help give the grandparents some much needed time off during the day.

After three years in foster care, the kids' case finally closed with a positive outcome. With the support and advocacy of the CASAs on the case, the grandparents were granted permanent guardianship for all four kids. They are thriving in their grandparents' home and have been able to maintain a positive relationship with the biological parents. The grandparents allow both the mother and father to visit the children as regularly as they want, provided they are sober and safe when visiting. Finally, after three years of uncertainty and instability, the four siblings have a safe and permanent home with their grandparents, and they continue to have a positive relationship with Ken and Tessa who are no longer their CASAs officially but are now considered friends of the family.

“I finished CASA Pre-Service training in the summer of 2020 and chose a case with two children. The information I read about Lesha, and Elijah tugged on my heart strings, and I wanted to be their CASA. Lesha and Elijah were born into a family fraught with dysfunction and turmoil. By the time Lesha was 9 and Elijah was 6, they had been exposed to methamphetamine, domestic violence, neglect, and had experienced homelessness. Right before they were placed into foster care, the kids had missed 19 consecutive days of school, spurring the concerned reports to Child Protective Services.

The children were removed from their mom and went to live with their twenty-year-old sister who had grown up under similar circumstances. Both Lesha and Elijah had fallen behind in school significantly due to the neglect and dysfunction of their home life. Lesha, at 9 years old, was hardly able to read, and that became one of our top priorities to focus on with her teachers. Additionally, I started advocating for therapy for both children who carried significant trauma with them. The kids’ sister struggled to adjust to the responsibility of caring for two children at such a young age. As the CASA, I was a support for her, getting her connected to the resources she needed as she transitioned into being a full-time caretaker.

The kids have been in foster care for a full year now, and I’ve been their CASA for almost as long. The outcome of their case has yet to be determined. But I am as committed as ever to be the one constant for them as they navigate the foster care system.

As a CASA, I’ve seen the powerful impact someone can have on these cases, and in the lives of these children when you show up consistently, and you work towards their best interests. It’s nothing fancy, and sometimes it’s as simple as showing up for baseball games or a school lunch, so they know you care about them. In a world where these kids haven’t been shown how much they are loved or valued, my ability to be that person for them is invaluable.”

~CASA Advocate Jami





Gavin and Abby were on their 2nd removal from their birth mother when a judge assigned a volunteer Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) to their case. 3-year-old Gavin had serious medical issues requiring surgery on his legs that had not been properly addressed with his mother. He and his younger sister Abby had lost their birth father that year to a drug overdose. The CASA met with them on a regular basis, getting to know the kids and their foster family. Nearly a year later, the case was dismissed, and the kids were reunified with their birth mother. However, within 6 weeks the kids were removed from their mother for the third time after she was pulled over going the wrong way on a highway with the kids in the car, high on methamphetamine.

Their CASA was immediately back on the case and visiting the kids, being their constant in yet another time of turmoil and struggle. He met with them several times each month and became familiar with the new foster family, their 3rd placement that year. The CASA connected with Gavin and Abby's doctors, daycare providers, teachers, counselors, and birth mother to get a complete picture of

the children so he could make the best recommendations for their well-being. He walked alongside them as Gavin started elementary school and as they both moved to their 4<sup>th</sup> and final foster home. The Advocate was integral in keeping the kids together and was able to provide support for the kids' foster mom who was a teacher at Gavin's school.

The kids played soccer this fall, and the CASA attended multiple games to cheer them on. The games also gave the CASA the opportunity to get to know the extended family of the kids' foster mom who welcomed Gavin and Abby to their family with open arms. After years spent in foster care, parental rights of their birth mother were terminated, and their foster mom is pursuing adoption of the siblings.

In December, the CASA visited the kids to celebrate Abby's 5th birthday. When he arrived, 7-year-old Gavin came running over to greet him. After the CASA asked Gavin how he was doing, Gavin's face lit up in a big smile as he said, "Good! We're in a forever home!"

Gavin and Abby were officially adopted by their foster mom in 2022. Their CASA was at the ceremony along with the kids, their adoptive mom, their new grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins and classmates. The CASA continues to have a relationship with the kids and stays in contact with them regularly.



Child Protective Services were called by medical staff when six-year-old Mason was brought to the emergency room by his dad and stepmom with multiple injuries. Mason showed signs of neglect and physical abuse including dislocated shoulders and severe bruising. He spent two weeks in a hospital where a feeding tube was put in to combat malnourishment, and his shoulders were re-broken to heal them properly. Because of the severity of his case, Mason was put into a foster home in Yellowstone County and a judge immediately assigned a volunteer Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) to his case.



Mason's transition into foster care was far from easy as he was significantly behind in school and developmental stages. Due to his history of abuse, Mason suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder, which made his physical therapy sessions challenging. As he adjusted to foster care, Mason started to have behavioral outbursts in school and at home. However, Mason's CASA was not ready to give up on him. She started attending school meetings to advocate for Mason's educational and social needs and helped get him into proper Special Education classes. She faithfully attended medical appointments and was a support, not just for Mason as he went through the tumult of foster care, but also the foster family who struggled to manage Mason's outbursts. When his foster parents expressed doubt in their ability to continue caring for him, the CASA encouraged them to keep fighting for Mason so he wouldn't be moved to another unfamiliar place.

As they started to make progress after months of hard-fought battles, COVID-19 hit the community and Mason was thrown into another phase of instability. With school closures, the CASA and foster parents were afraid Mason would fall even farther behind in school. Fortunately, Mason's CASA, a retired teacher, started tutoring him over Zoom so he could continue learning. She was an invaluable resource for both Mason and his foster parents throughout the stresses of COVID-19.

As he transitioned back to school, Mason's teacher was excited to report the progress he had made. His CASA and foster parents are grateful to see that Mason's behavioral outbursts are becoming less frequent and more manageable, and his doctors are pleased with his medical and therapeutic advancements. The outcome of Mason's story in foster care has yet to be decided, but his CASA will continue to stand by his side and advocate for his needs, best interests, and a safe permanent home.

Rita had not yet reached her teenage years when her father overdosed in front of her. While he survived, child protective services removed Rita from his care and placed her with her aunt and uncle in Billings. Rita's mother was halfway across the county, serving time in prison. Not long after Rita had been living with her aunt and uncle, they informed Rita's social worker that they didn't have the resources to continue caring for her. Rita was then moved to a group home out of state. It was around this time that the judge overseeing Rita's case assigned a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) to visit Rita regularly and speak up for her best interests.

While Court Appointed Special Advocates can receive exceptions to regular visits if the child is placed far away, Rita's CASA insisted on making the hours-long drive to the facility to see her. These visits continued for months, until Rita's Medicaid funding was discontinued, and she was sent back to the group home in Billings. It was while living at the group home that Rita learned her father had passed away from his drug addiction. Over the next two years, Rita would be moved from the group home to a foster home, then to another foster home, then back with her aunt and uncle, then again to a different foster home, with each move triggered by its own set of circumstances. During this time of transition, turmoil, and personal tragedy, Rita's CASA was her constant.



As is the unfortunate reality for many children in foster care, especially teenagers, a large portion of Rita's possessions were gradually left behind each time she moved to a new placement. Rita's CASA put in an extraordinary amount of effort to find these items at the former foster homes. She also arranged to go through the storage units owned by the state, containing years' worth of lost items belonging to children in foster care, digging through bags and boxes until she was able to locate specific items that Rita had lost in her moves.

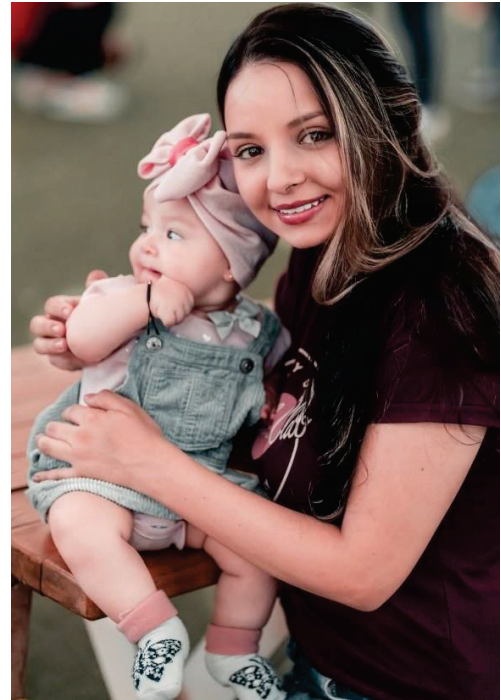
Rita was placed back in a residential treatment facility when Montana announced its first case of COVID-19. With normal recreational activities suspended and all off-campus field trips cancelled, many of the youth at the facility began receiving parcels from their parents with books and games to keep them occupied. With minimal family support in her life, Rita did not expect to receive anything in the mail. She was soon surprised and thrilled when the staff handed her a care package from her CASA. With no visitors allowed on the facility's campus, Rita's CASA had to discontinue her regular visits, a commitment she had maintained consistently for three years. In lieu of visits, the CASA began calling her several times each week, checking in on her needs, and giving Rita a comforting voice – and ear – during scary times.

Even during the uncertainty of COVID-19, the CASA worked hard to find family connection and potential permanent options for Rita. Until she achieves permanency, the CASA will continue to be a steady relationship and voice for her.

Child Protective Services received multiple reports that Ela was not being fed regularly and that she consistently showed up to school in filthy clothes and poor hygiene. When her mother was arrested for outstanding warrants, 15-year-old Ela was placed into the foster care system in Billings. Not long after Ela entered foster care, she ran away and despite best efforts, Child Protective Services was unable to locate her.

Fast forward to the next year when reports were made concerning domestic violence between a boyfriend living with his girlfriend and baby in a hotel. When Child Protective Services came to investigate the reports, they found baby Amara living in the hotel with her mom and dad. As social workers investigated the situation further, they were shocked to find that Amara's mom was 16-year-old Ela who had been on runaway status from foster care. It quickly became clear that Ela's boyfriend, Amara's father, was physically abusive and putting both Ela and Amara in serious danger.

Ela and baby Amara were placed back into foster care and went to live in a group home for young mothers with babies. A volunteer Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) was assigned to the case to help ensure that both girls were receiving the services and resources they needed, and to advocate for their safety and permanency. The CASA assigned to the case was a seasoned Advocate who knew that Ela would most likely age out of foster care without being adopted. He started visiting Ela and baby Amara and worked to make sure that Amara was receiving all her infant pediatric visits and that she was safe and healthy.



As time went on, Ela was not able to care for Amara safely on her own without constant supervision from the group home. After much deliberation, the social worker made the difficult decision to move Amara into a different foster home to keep her safe. The CASA worked to make Amara's transition into a new home as smooth as possible and advocated for regular visits between Ela and Amara so they could continue to build their relationship and bond. As Ela moved closer to aging out of foster care, she became less engaged with both her CASA and social worker and despite their best efforts to try and get her through high school and into secondary education, Ela ran away again and soon after, aged out of foster care.

Since then, Ela's CASA and social worker were able to determine that Ela was living with some of her family out of town. It is their hope that someday, if Ela finds healing in her own life, she will be able to be part of her daughter's life again. The CASA continues to visit Amara regularly at her foster home and is pleased to report that Amara is doing well and growing fast. He remains committed to being a safe and stable adult for Amara and a resource for Ela. The CASA hopes that Amara and Ela can one day break the cycles of abuse and neglect that have overshadowed their childhoods and live healthy and happy lives.

Grace was removed from her mother's care for the third time due to severe neglect when she was just five years old. None of Grace's extended family was able to adopt her, so she started her long and isolating journey through foster care. By the time a judge appointed a volunteer Court Appointed Special Advocate to Grace's case, she was 16 years old and had lived in 44 different foster care and treatment facility placements.

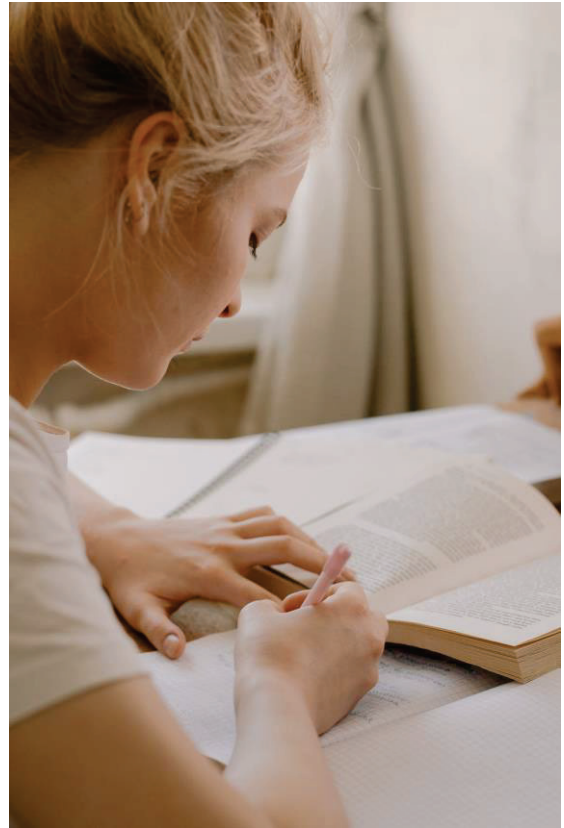
The volunteer Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) got started right away, meeting Grace, her social worker, and foster parents, as well as going through the mountain of notes and documents related to the case.

An unfortunate reality of many child welfare cases involving older youth is that most will not be adopted into a family but will age out of foster care and end up homeless. The CASA was determined to not let Grace become another statistic.

From their first meeting, the CASA was asking Grace what she wanted to do with her life after foster care. When she mentioned a desire to go to college, the CASA started gathering information and applications on various schools and helped Grace fill out scholarship and financial aid applications.

Now, at 18, Grace has aged out of foster care and has completed her first year at a university where she received a full ride scholarship. She achieved straight A marks in all her classes in her first year. She keeps in contact with her CASA and updates her frequently on the friends she's made in school and her classes.

The CASA, who is now a trusted friend, has made sure Grace has access to housing in the summer months and holiday breaks when she is not able to live on campus. Grace's CASA was with her for just over a year before she aged out, but she managed to drastically change the course of Grace's life for the better. Grace, who experienced unimaginable uncertainty and trauma in her life is the first one of her family to go to college and she is well on her way to breaking the cycle of abuse and neglect.





When Grover's family brought him to the hospital for respiratory difficulty, doctors recognized there was more going on. Grover had not grown to the weight and size expected for infants of his age, referred to as *failure to thrive*. When a social worker came to meet with Grover's family, she discovered that the mother was severely cognitively delayed, and was living in a small house with a large number of other people.

For the time being, child protective services removed Grover from his mother's care and placed him in a foster home. Soon, Grover was found to have several previously unidentified medical conditions, including significant sensory deficits and developmental delays. Due to Grover's tremendous medical and social needs, a Court Appointed Special Advocate was assigned to the case – someone who happened to have significant pediatric healthcare and administration experience.



Grover's CASA became a catalyst in building a bridge of trust between Grover's mother and child protective services. The CASA helped Grover's biological family to understand that the social workers had Grover's best interests in mind – while also sharing with the family the progress Grover was making in his development and various therapies. In addition, the CASA worked to help the family understand how happy Grover was with his current foster parents.

As a result of these efforts, the family agreed to submit to specialized tests, which allowed doctors to determine the biological causes of some of Grover's conditions, and thus prescribe the best treatments and services for his needs. Grover's CASA was committed to maintaining communication with the social worker, service providers, foster family, and biological family. Because of this, all were able to work toward a plan for Grover to grow up in a safe home that encourages his ongoing progress, where he will know the love of his extended family.



Before his 5<sup>th</sup> birthday, Parker's birth father had been incarcerated, and his mom, pregnant with his sister Eliza, was living with a new boyfriend who was physically abusive. At 8-months pregnant, mom tested positive for meth and Parker tested positive for cocaine through exposure in the home and was subsequently placed into foster care. When Eliza was born, she was placed with Parker who was staying with his grandfather. Soon after they entered foster care, a judge assigned a volunteer Court Appointed Special Advocate for the two children.

It quickly became apparent that Parker would need a significant amount of therapy for development and educational delays. The CASA worked tirelessly to find creative solutions to get Parker connected to the services he needed, despite frequent roadblocks. It was particularly challenging for the grandfather, who was elderly and struggling with his own health, to care for two young kids. Eliza, who had been exposed to a significant number of dangerous substances in utero had a lot of health issues of her



own which needed to be addressed once she was born, including having to detox from meth in her system. Meanwhile, their mom continued to spiral into drug use and was evicted from her home. She and her boyfriend were living in a tent after Eliza was removed and the social worker and CASA on the case worried that she wouldn't be able to get her life on track to get the kids back.

Tragically, almost a year into the case, the grandfather died unexpectedly, throwing the two siblings into another season of change and loss. As they transitioned into another foster home, the kids relied heavily on their CASA as a familiar and comforting adult.

It was at this time that mom started to engage with the social worker on the case to receive the services she needed to get back on her feet. Mom was able to get into a domestic violence shelter, where she was able to get clean from her addictions before transitioning into long-term housing. Slowly both kids transitioned back to live with their mom. To everyone's relief, mom jumped right in to get Parker to all his appointments he needed to continue his healing process. Now, several months in, mom and kids are doing well together.

The CASA played an integral role in the case, helping first the grandpa, and then mom to get connected to resources and services, and being a source of stability and familiarity for the siblings.

As a toddler, Kayden was abandoned and left with strangers who abused him. The state placed Kayden with a foster family who became his legal guardians, but after a decade with this family, his foster father fell into addiction and Kayden was removed by the state again and placed in a group home. When his former foster parents filed for divorce, it was finally decided that he wouldn't be able to go back to their care.

With no clear path forward, a judge appointed a CASA to Kayden's case. Having experienced so much abandonment and uncertainty in his young life, Kayden was in desperate need of a stable relationship. Fortunately, because CASA Advocates commit to stay with a child in foster care until they find a safe and permanent home, the Advocate was able to be that stable person for Kayden.

The CASA was able to meet with him several times in those early weeks, but he was soon moved to an out-of-state treatment facility for behavioral issues. School was a serious struggle for Kayden who was behind in classes. Continued behavioral issues in and out of the classroom only caused more disruption in Kayden's education. The CASA started to visit with Kayden over the phone and facetime during his months away in the ground home. Through phone calls, mailed letters and care packages, and they were able to slowly build a trusting relationship.

One day Kayden shared with his CASA that his grandparents were alive and living on the Hi-Line in Montana. The CASA began gathering more information, and was able to reach them, learning that they were caring people who had lost contact with Kayden while he was in foster care. The CASA walked them through what it would mean to bring Kayden into their home, and they agreed.

After eight months at the out-of-state facility, Kayden was discharged into the care of his grandparents. Since then, the CASA has traveled up to visit him several times as everyone awaits the adoption being finalized. The CASA also helped the grandparents get Kayden set up with a math tutor, and he is thriving in school. After a lifetime of inconsistency and dysfunction, Kayden is finally in a home that can provide stability and love. He continues to stay in close contact with his CASA, and updates her regularly on his school, sports and extracurricular activities.

Felicity, Matt, and Zoey were brought to the emergency room with their dad after they were involved in a car accident. Their dad was intoxicated at the time and was taken to jail for outstanding warrants after he was treated at the hospital. The three children came to the hospital filthy with no shoes and told hospital staff that they hadn't eaten in two days. After the children were treated for minor injuries, Child Protective Services was called over concerns of child neglect. Unfortunately, this was not Felicity, Matt, and Zoey's first experience with the child welfare system as they had been in foster care previously.



The social worker on the case requested a volunteer Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA), knowing the children would need the extra support and stability that an Advocate could provide. Right as the CASA was appointed to the case, COVID-19 hit the community, adding more turmoil and strain on the kids and their foster parents. The CASA first met the kids over Zoom and started to build a relationship with them and their foster parents. Despite the challenges the health crisis presented for the CASA, she remained dedicated to advocating for the kids and working for their best interests. The foster parents struggled to maintain the level of care that all three kids needed as they navigated the complications of school closures and online learning, all while working to address the serious medical, emotional, and developmental needs of each child. Because of these challenges, the oldest child, Felicity, was eventually moved into a new foster home to help lift the burden on the family that still provided placement for Matt and Zoey.



The CASA was instrumental in helping Felicity adjust to her new environment and communicating her history and needs to her new foster family. One of the most important roles that the CASA played in this case was helping to keep Felicity, Matt and Zoey connected to each other when they were separated. The siblings' relationship with each other was close, and it was incredibly difficult for them to be moved into separate homes. The CASA advocated for frequent visits for the children so they could see each other often, and she facilitated communication between the foster families to ensure that the kids stayed connected to one another, especially during the social isolation of COVID-19. The children's CASA also played an important role in keeping them connected to their Native American heritage, Tribe, and extended family.

Now, a year into the case, the CASA continues to be the steady anchor for all three children. Each time she goes to visit the kids, the CASA practices reading with each child to help them keep up with their classes. Felicity, Matt, and Zoey are all thriving in their foster homes and continue to see each other frequently. The kids' dad relinquished his parental rights several months into the case, and the children's foster families are currently working to adopt the siblings. The CASA will continue to help with the adoption process and remains committed to being a consistent adult for the kids until they achieve their forever homes.

Unrelated to any abuse or neglect, Ashleigh had lost her leg in an accident as a child, which required ongoing, proactive medical attention. Starting around Ashleigh's freshman year of high school, her mother had fallen into heavy methamphetamine and alcohol abuse. Ashleigh and her mother descended into poverty and had started living with several other addicts and convicted criminals. A probation officer notified child protective services about Ashleigh's presence in the home, and when the social worker arrived, she found Ashleigh there with no one else, but a handful of adults passed out on meth.

With the case opened in court, the social worker placed Ashleigh with an elderly family member, who had her own limitations with taking care of a teenager. Due to the Ashleigh's age and the complex dynamics of the case, the judge assigned Ashleigh a volunteer Court Appointed Special Advocate. In addition to meeting with Ashleigh at the family member's home, the new CASA began visiting at school and getting in contact with Ashleigh's teachers.

The CASA was able to get Ashleigh set up with additional resources at school for her disability and encouraged Ashleigh not to let that disability prevent her from participating in high school sports and other extracurricular activities. The CASA began joining her at her prosthetic specialist and other medical appointments and would relay important updates to the social worker who could then follow up and coordinate additional services. With Ashleigh being an enrolled member of her Native American tribe, the CASA also made sure to coordinate with the tribal representatives on opening additional opportunities for Ashleigh. Because the CASA regularly submitted written reports to the judge overseeing Ashleigh's case, there were several occasions when the judge followed up and asked the CASA what he could do to make resources available for this young woman.

Now approaching the end of high school, while she continues to live with a family member, Ashleigh remains in the long-term custody of the state, a status she will retain until her 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. Ashleigh is not only a highly successful student, but a talented athlete on the track and field team. As she prepares to submit her applications to colleges around Montana, she still has her CASA to hear her wants, her needs, and her dreams – and someone who can work to make them a reality.





Gabe entered foster care for the third time when he was thirteen years old. His mom, suffering from severe mental illness, could not safely care for her son. When social workers came to investigate allegations of neglect of Gabe, they found the home to have no running water, electricity, or food. There were open containers of alcohol within reach of Gabe, and his mom tested positive for methamphetamine. His mom spiraled into her addiction and mental illness and expressed multiple times that she was not interested in getting Gabe back. The court eventually terminated the rights of his mom, and Gabe was placed into the long-term custody of the state.



Gabe's volunteer Court Appointed Special Advocate was assigned to his case by a judge after Gabe had been in foster care for several years and had attempted to run away from the group home he was living in at the time. As the CASA met with Gabe and staff from his group home, it became clear that Gabe had a lot of anger and post-traumatic stress from the trauma that he experienced through his life. The CASA began facilitating communication between Gabe and his caretakers to help resolve some of the conflict that was occurring in the group home. Through the next several months, Gabe continued to struggle in his relationships and seemed to become more isolated and marginalized in his living situation. His CASA was a steady anchor for him through these times of loneliness and encouraged Gabe to take responsibility for his own actions and find strategies to manage his anger.

As Gabe approached the age of eighteen and the reality of aging-out of foster care, his CASA helped him investigate continuing education and life skill programs to help Gabe in his transition into adulthood. Gabe had been wanting to join the military from a young age and applied to a secondary education program for the military. Gabe was a very bright and dedicated student and his CASA and group home staff thought it would be a great next step for Gabe to join this military program. It was a big disappointment when the program turned down Gabe's application because he was coming out of foster care, and because of previous records of his behavioral issues in one of his group homes. Gabe's CASA did not give up on his future but advocated for the program to reconsider his application, arguing that Gabe should not be turned down because he was coming from foster care and because of early records of behavioral issues resulting from trauma. After further consideration, they agreed to let Gabe into the program.

Gabe excelled in his courses and graduated right as he was about to age out of foster care. Now, at eighteen, Gabe is in independent housing for youth who have aged out of foster care and is working as he deliberates his next steps. Gabe's childhood and adolescence were fraught with uncertainty, and he went through numerous group homes, schools, and social workers while in foster care. Through it all, his CASA stuck with him to be a consistent and trusted adult for Gabe when he had no one else.