

CASA Mission

Close to Home For Longtime Volunteer

By Jacie Scott
SPECIAL CONTRIBUTOR

Preston Hollow resident Linda Swartz understands the fears that children in foster care face.



Linda Swartz

She's had to face them herself.

"I was removed from my home at the age of 14 or 15 and was in the system until I aged out at 18," said

Swartz, who grew up in Georgia. "Back then, I didn't have anyone there for me. Just a constant flow of strangers."

Today, Swartz is a voice for neglected or abused youth through her work with Dallas CASA.

Dallas CASA [Court Appointed Special Advocates] is a nonprofit organization of volunteers who advocate for the best interests of abused or neglected children.

CASA volunteers work side-by-side with Child Protective Services to ensure that the children find safe and permanent homes as quickly as possible.

CASA volunteers can sometimes be that one constant for children who are facing a time of inconsistencies.

"Being removed from their home and the changing of caseworkers throughout the case, I am the familiar face who stays in the child's life until they are placed in a permanent, forever home," said Swartz, a mother of four. "The smiles and hugs I get from a child when I visit them or pick them up from school are the best part of the volunteer job."

That is what lured Swartz to CASA initially.

She was volunteering at a temporary shelter for foster youth, rocking babies to sleep and playing with children, when a friend told her about the organization's mission.

She desired to make a long-term impact in the life of a child. CASA opened that door

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for her.

In her seven years as an advocate, Swartz has worked on seven cases and has seen positive changes in the lives of 11 children.

"She's a dedicated, tireless and effective advocate for vulnerable children who likely have never known a caring, reliable, resourceful adult," said Kathleen LaValle, Dallas CASA executive director and president. "Linda inspires us all to want to do more to protect abused children from further harm and to provide them with the very best chance of a future filled with hope, healing and happiness."

Swartz serves on the Dallas CASA Children's Council, a 35-member board that raises funds through various events, promotes CASA's mission in the community, and assists in other opportunities that support the advocates and children of CASA.

She's previously served as chair of National Adoption Day,

held annually the Saturday before Thanksgiving in Dallas.

Her most recent project, however, was the Champion of Children Award Dinner in November.

The event honors leaders who have committed to improving the lives of children who have been marked by adversity. Swartz and her husband, Rob, chaired the event at the Ritz-Carlton, with more than 500 guests.

The event raised a record-setting \$606,000 for Dallas CASA — a definite high moment for Swartz and the organization.

"From chairing the 2014 Champion of Children Award Dinner with her husband, Rob, to her leadership on our Board, to her vital service as a volunteer advocate — you name it, Linda does it for Dallas CASA," said Greg May, Dallas CASA board chairman. "She's an inspiration to our board in so many ways."

With prom season around the corner, Dallas CASA Children's Council and Comerica

Bank are starting a prom dress drive for teens in foster care.

"We are in early stages of organizing and plan to begin the drive February 2015 with dresses available mid-March 2015," Swartz said.

Last March, the organization moved to a new facility with the goal of increasing the number of advocates, and information sessions are held to educate potential volunteers.

"There are more children in the system than there are advocates," Swartz said. "When people hear the mission and the impact, they want to give what they can."

Swartz's work with the organization combined with her own life journey has taught her that it's truly the small things in life that end up meaning so much.

"The more hugs, smiles and caring for a child in need you give, the better it feels," Swartz said. "I am very grateful that I'm at a point in my life where I'm able to help children who need a friendly face and a voice in court."

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