

## **BECAUSE CASA WAS THERE #1**

### **FOR 12 YEARS, ELENA KNEW ONLY ABUSE AND ABANDONMENT**

For 12 years of life, Elena knew only abuse and abandonment. Yet when Dallas CASA advocate Karen took on Elena's challenging and complex case, something changed for both of them. "She's just an amazing young lady, with what it takes to overcome her past," Karen said. "She's been through more than any child should ever have to go through but from the get-go, I saw something in this young lady that was so resilient and so open. She moved me."

Removed from their birth home by Child Protective Services (CPS) due to sexual violence, physical abuse, neglect and drug use in the home, Elena and her three siblings were placed in foster care and, eventually, adopted. Elena, scarred by years of abuse, refused the adoption. She acted out with her new family and experienced psychological breakdown, resulting in repeatedly hospitalizations. With Karen working behind the scenes, Elena was temporarily placed in a residential treatment center where she received counseling and guidance, and the structure she needed in a safe environment.

In Karen, Elena has a dependable adult she can rely on for the first time in her life. An experienced advocate for infants and toddlers, Karen has now discovered her gift for empowering teenagers to help themselves. As Elena's CASA advocate, Karen worked with the courts and CPS to make the best possible placement for Elena's unique needs. Much to everyone's delight, Elena has blossomed at the treatment center, making good grades, running 5K races, tending animals at the facility's barn and earning privileges such as trips to the beach. With counseling, she has begun to warm to the idea of letting go of her painful, abusive past and being adopted by her foster family. She now calls Karen, hungry for a connection to home and happy to share good news about the progress she's making in treatment. And Karen, like no one else Elena has ever known, always answers.

## **BECAUSE CASA WAS THERE #2**

At only ten years old, Tyrone was already struggling in life. After being removed from his home due to neglect by his mother, Tyrone was living in foster care and needed someone to look out for his needs. Dallas CASA volunteer Doug was assigned to Tyrone's case, and he began working on Tyrone's behalf right away.

"When I visited him at the foster home, he was polite, well-mannered and well-behaved," he said. "It was one glowing report after another." But school was a different story. The school reported to Doug that Tyrone was disruptive, not paying attention, a distraction in class and academically below grade level.

“So I sat him down and said, ‘Your teacher tells me you’re not paying attention. What’s up with that?’” Doug asked. “And this child says to me he doesn’t care about school because he can’t see anything on the board anyway. And a light bulb went off in my head.”

Doug asked Tyrone to sit at the back of the class and administered his own impromptu eye test. Tyrone could not distinguish letters on the board until he was in the second row of the class – and even then it was a struggle.

Tyrone needed glasses.

“Within two weeks, he had glasses,” Doug said. “They were these black, rectangular glasses and he looked really nice in them and was proud to wear them. But, most of all, he could see.” By the end of the school year, Tyrone was on grade level academically and on track behavior-wise, no longer a distraction now that he could see and participate in class work and learning.

“At times, there are big things I can do that make a difference,” experienced advocate Doug says. “But I find the little things can be the most meaningful to the kids and me. Here’s a boy who’s disruptive in school, not progressing and so he assumes he’s stupid. That label could have stuck with him for life, but he wasn’t stupid. He just needed glasses. And I helped make that happen.”

*\*Children’s names have been changed to protect their identity*

### **BECAUSE CASA WAS THERE #3**

For a decade as their mother struggled with drug addiction, two siblings would seek refuge at their grandmother’s house for days and even weeks at a time. She was mother and grandmother to them as their own mother battled her disease and their home life descended into chaos and confusion.

Ultimately, Child Protective Services intervened on the children’s behalf, removing them from their mother’s unsafe and neglectful home. But this time when they sought refuge with grandma, the two young sisters were denied and placed with an aunt instead. Their case was soon referred to Dallas CASA for assignment to a volunteer advocate who could work in the best interest of the children.

Volunteer advocate Sandy was reviewing paperwork on the case before meeting the family for the first time when the error hit her like a lightning bolt. “The first day I came to the CASA office to learn about the case, I saw in the case files that the wrong grandma was restricted to supervised visits,” Sandy said.

The children had two very different grandmothers. Their paternal grandmother had a criminal record and was only allowed supervised visits with the children. Their maternal grandmother, with whom they'd sought refuge, did not have a criminal record and should have been allowed full contact with the children. But in the confusion of removal, the maternal grandmother was accidentally restricted to supervised visits only.

The family, overwhelmed by the changes in their family dynamic, had not asked why the children's maternal grandmother was not allowed to be with the children.

The family had gone weeks with an aunt keeping the children with no other help. With the aunt working full-time, the strain on her and the children had been immense. In that one moment, Sandy was able to change the entire family's lives for the better. She notified Child Protective Services and the judge in the case, and the error was immediately corrected. When Sandy called the family with the news that the grandmother could be with the children again, they broke down in tears.

"Now the grandmother could help raise the children, as she had since they were born," she said. "Their lives were so much easier with two adults in the picture."

The children's grandmother and aunt are now raising them in a safe, loving home. The grandmother and aunt both work full time, but they trade shifts so one of them is always home with the children, providing the stability they'd lacked for their first decade of life. An experienced volunteer advocate, Sandy has worked four cases over three years and says the role is a rewarding one for her.

"When I got these children back in their grandmother's home, I knew I'd made a difference," she said. "Their lives were certainly changed, but so was mine."

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