

VOICES RAISING VOICES

In 2016, Georgia CASA launched a project, Voices Raising Voices, for CASA volunteers throughout the state to share their volunteer stories. The goal is to help recruit a new wave of CASA volunteers so that even more children can have a voice for their best interests in court. By raising more volunteer voices, we can all help ensure more children across Georgia benefit from a CASA volunteer by their sides. Here's the story of how one CASA volunteer changed a youth's life.

This story is also a tribute to the CASA volunteer, Ken Brand, who passed away in early 2018. He has left a living legacy to the CASA program for which he volunteered as well as to the entire CASA network in Georgia.

MEET KEN

"George" entered foster care in June 2015 shortly after his father passed away. Being in ill health, his father had arranged for a friend to take George upon his death. (His mother's whereabouts were unknown, and his two older sisters were unable to take care of him.) Unfortunately, the arrangement with the friend did not work out and George entered foster care.

I was assigned as a CASA volunteer for George in February 2016. At this time, he was staying at a foster home that had three young, adopted children. George and the foster parents were struggling with their relationship. He was a boy that did not have a troubled background or severe behavioral issues, and after a couple of visits with George, I could see part of the problem – the foster parents had never had a teenage child.

The foster parents had done well keeping George on track for graduation from high school, but there were still bumps in the road to come. During my visits, I kept stressing the importance of George's education to him. Afterwards, the foster parents and I would spend time discussing raising a teenager, as I had survived raising two teenagers. A considerable amount of time was spent mentoring the parents, in addition to George. Gradually, I could see the relationship improving as the foster parents learned how different having a teenager can be.

There were times the foster parents had problems with getting services for George or had issues to resolve. I was able to help the foster parents get over the hurdles and see the services were there for George when needed.

We had trips to the counselor when there were issues in the household. I was concerned George was receiving medication that should be prescribed by a psychiatrist, and was able to have George see the psychiatrist as well as his counselor. The counselor and psychiatrist were able to coordinate treatment plans.

When George struggled in school, I contacted the counselor and was able to monitor his progress online. We eventually had a meeting about his progress that included me, the counselor and George. This seemed to help him turn the corner on his education. May 2017 brought the day everyone had been looking forward to – George's graduation from high school! I felt very proud watching George get his diploma, but not as proud as George was on completing his high school education.

As an aside, George's sisters tried to maintain contact with him, but there was some conflict between the foster parents and one of his sisters. When I would visit George, I would update both sisters on his progress. When George graduated from high school, regular contact was reestablished with both of his sisters.

July 2017 brought another change in George's life. He left his foster home and entered an Independent Living Program (ILP) in Columbus, GA. Being protective of him, I made a trip to the ILP program before he was accepted to make sure it was an appropriate placement.

Today, George is working and learning how to live independently. At Ken's memorial service in February 2018, George spoke highly of Ken and talked about how important he was as his CASA volunteer.

Ken leaves his CASA legacy to all of us...

"Being a CASA brings many highs and lows while working with children. All of it is worth it when your case comes to a conclusion and the children are reunified, adopted or become independent adults. This is why I am a CASA volunteer." ~Ken Brand