

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 CASA volunteers by their sides. Here's the story of a CASA volunteer in Columbus, GA.

MEET ANTONIO

Antonio Dunston has been a CASA volunteer since December 1999. He currently volunteers with Chattahoochee CASA in Columbus. One day when he was at the YMCA in Columbus volunteering with the youth basketball program, the director of the local CASA program was also at the YMCA and told him about CASA, and specifically about the need for more male CASA volunteers. The director explained how the CASA program was different from being a big brother/big sister, and how as an advocate in court for a child, you could impact a child's life in an even greater way. Twenty years later, Antonio has served as a CASA volunteer for over 20 children!

Antonio has found his most rewarding cases to be those when families have been reunited and when children have been placed in families where they are loved, grow, and thrive to become successful as adults.

Antonio had an influential role in the lives of three brothers several years ago when he served as a CASA volunteer while living in Texas. The eldest brother had aged out of foster care prior to Antonio being assigned to the younger two teen brothers. As Antonio began bonding with the two brothers and advocating for their best interests, the eldest brother contacted the CASA program because he wanted to get to know Antonio as well. Antonio then formed a bond with him. The eldest brother joined the Army, the middle brother now permanently lives with his uncle, and the youngest brother is now under the custody of the eldest brother. All three are doing well, thanks in large part to Antonio's influence and advocacy in their lives while they were in foster care.

Antonio states that being a CASA volunteer is "more than just volunteering; the advocate role has a deeper level of responsibility that helps establish lines of accountability from me to the child, and from the child to me. The child understands that I am his eyes, ears, and voice, and for me that builds uncompromising trust."

Happily married to Dr. Stephanie Dunston, a professor for Western Governors University, Antonio and his wife adopted their five-year-old grandson, Kameron, and raise him full-time. Antonio enjoys running, yoga, and watching his grandson discover new things each day. In addition to being a CASA volunteer, Antonio volunteers with House of Heroes and the CATO (College, Armed Forces, and Tech Outreach) mentor program with Friendship Missionary Baptist Church. He also continues to serve as an active member of the Fort Benning Sergeants Major Association.

"If not me, then who? If I want see a difference made, I need to do something about it instead of complaining." ---Antonio Dunston