

CASA supports voiceless

Children need advocates in court

By **KIRBY SPROULS**

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SOUTH BEND — Robin Smith didn't fully comprehend what she was getting into when she went from a recruiter of corporate executives to a recruiter of child advocates.

She joined CASA of St. Joseph County two years ago and now recruits and trains volunteers to serve as the voices of abused or neglected children in court.

"Some days I walk around slack-jawed at what is going on with children in this county," Smith said. "I led a very sheltered life."

Smith discovered that the court is full of innocent children who are victims of neglect and sexual, physical or emotional abuse.

At any given time, Smith said, more than 1,000 children are adjudicated by the court in St. Joseph County to be in need of services. Those are the children that CASA is funded to represent.

"In a best-case scenario," she said, "about one-third of those children are represented by a CASA (court-appointed special advocate). We can't give every child a CASA."

There are currently about 100 CASA volunteers in St. Joseph County, "but we could use twice as many," Smith said.

That's why she and CASA executive director Brenda Matuszkiewicz are desperately seeking volunteers for summer and fall training.

A CASA must be at least 21 years old, able to pass a criminal history check and a drug screen, and take the eight-week training course.

Volunteers come from various backgrounds. "We have stay-at-home moms, attorneys and professionals, people who have been foster parents and even students," Smith said.

Gaylen Wynn, 58, of Granger, began volunteering last year after taking early retirement from Martin's SuperMarket, where he was vice president of human resources.



He's found that being a CASA is "a tremendous opportunity to be directly engaged in meaningful way."

Wynn was assigned to one case involving six children, ages 3 to 14. In addition to preparing reports and going to court on behalf of those children, Wynn devotes one-on-one time with the youths. For example, he's taken the 14-year-old to community theater productions and Notre Dame lacrosse games.

Wynn said the CASA's role is taken seriously.

"You meet with teachers or anyone involved in their life," he said. "Those people treat you as part of the team. And the court gives a lot of careful consideration to your input."

Smith said CASA volunteers are often the only ones whose sole interest in a case is the child.

"Our whole goal is to navigate through a murky, unclear path to get the child out of the (child) welfare system."

She said the work of a CASA volunteer is "something of an investigative position. They are legal, sworn officers of the court who are investigating the circumstances of the child."

Volunteers typically work an average of 10 to 15 hours a month, but more hours are available to those who want them — like Wynn.

All cases involving the CASA volunteers are in St. Joseph County Probate Court, where Peter J. Nemeth is judge.

Smith, 38, came to this job after working as a recruiter and head hunter in the corporate world.

Her CASA position was a "fortunate find," Smith said, calling it "fulfilling."

At the same time, Matuszkiewicz said "it is disheartening to us to know we don't have enough volunteers. We are stretched so thin that we don't even have enough volunteers for cases that we are mandated to be serving.

"If we were to advocate for every child that we are mandated, we would need 500 volunteers and a \$1 million budget — and that isn't going to happen.

"But we can't focus on that. We need to recruit and train and do what we can."

To learn more about the program or to obtain a volunteer application, contact Robin Smith at (574) 233-2272, rsmith@jjconline.org or go to www.sjccasa.org.