

CASA celebrates 20 years of advocacy

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FOR THE REGISTER-PAJARONIAN

WATSONVILLE — Childhood should be a time of irrepressible delight, relishing in daily firsts — the first time eating a popsicle on a hot summer day, the first time seeing a hummingbird up close, or the first time riding a bike without training wheels.

But for some children in Santa Cruz County, those firsts never happen or are buried under a troubled reality filled with abuse and neglect.

Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA), based on Freedom

Boulevard in Watsonville, attempts to bring the little joys of childhood back into the lives of the children they serve.

CASA screens and trains adult volunteers to serve as advocates on behalf of foster children who have been severely abused or neglected. At any given time, CASA serves up to 200 children (49 percent of those are from Watsonville) — out of 600 total children in foster care in the county.

According to Linda Bixby, CASA Development Director, advocates are “the eyes and ears” of juvenile dependency court and

are the one constant in a child’s life that is ever changing.

“The foster care system is a disorientating place to be,” Bixby said.

Each CASA advocate meets with their designated child every week until they are established in a safe home. Bixby says this process can take up to two years.

Advocates are sworn officers of the court and present recommendations to the judge regarding the child’s safety and well-being. Bixby says the judge often reads

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Watsonville Mayor Eduardo Montesino (right) presents CASA Executive Director Cynthia Druley with a plaque honoring CASA for its 20 years of service Tuesday night in Watsonville.

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CASA

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the advocate’s report first as they have firsthand knowledge of the child’s circumstances.

Advocates speak to anyone involved in the child’s life — social workers, extended family members, and teachers — and can be given educational rights by the court. This allows them to speak with the child’s teacher.

“We take the education of children very seriously,” Bixby said.

Mostly, advocates are friends and mentors — bringing fun to a child’s life.

“Some children have never gone to a movie, eaten in a restaurant or gone to the beach,” Bixby said.

CASA recently held a birthday party for a young boy in their program. He was 8 years old and had never had a birthday party. When they asked him to blow out the candles and make a wish, he had no idea what to do.

This year CASA is celebrating its 20th anniversary in Santa Cruz County, and the organization received a special award from Mayor Eduardo Montesino at the Watsonville City Council meeting Tuesday night.

According to Bixby, CASA Advocates contribute over \$500,000 in in-kind resources to the county, writing reports,

attending court hearings and simply donating their time. Volunteers come from all walks of life and run in age from 21 to 80-plus.

“A number of advocates have experienced trauma in their life or suffered abuse so they know what it is like, while others grew up in ideal homes and just want to give back,” Bixby said.

What binds them all together, Bixby says, is a calling to support the lives of children.

April is National Child Abuse Prevention Month.

Anyone who suspects a child is being abused or neglected can make an anonymous tip to the Child Protective Services Hotline for Santa Cruz County: 831-454-2273 or 877-505-3299.