

Special advocate finds work for the children worthwhile

By Karen McCowan
The Register-Guard
Published: Oct 15, 2008

Copyright 2008 The Register Guard, Eugene, Oregon, USA

After 35 years as a surgeon, Milt Watson was looking for two things in a retirement volunteer gig: something intellectually stimulating and something that would make a real difference.

He found both through the Court Appointed Special Advocates program. The agency matches each trained advocate with one child involved in the legal system because a parent has lost custody because of abuse or neglect. Watson found the work — in which he represents the best interest of the child during parental rights termination hearings, foster placements and the like — so satisfying that he took on five consecutive cases over five years before retiring from the program in 2003.

“But I found that I missed it,” Watson, 74, said in an interview last week. “It’s intensely fascinating work.”

And so, this fall, he’s back at it, advocating for another child and urging other men to sign up for CASA training in January so they can do the same.

CASA of Lane County Executive Director Megan Shultz said women have long dominated the agency’s volunteer ranks, though many times a male advocate would be advantageous for some children.

“Many boys, especially if they are older, can identify better with a male person,” Watson said.

The agency has worked hard the past three years to boost its number of men, in part by sponsoring a free men’s breakfast every fall to explain the commitment involved. This year’s breakfast will run from 8 a.m. to 9 a.m. Thursday at First Baptist Church of Eugene, 3550 Fox Meadow Road.

The agency’s goal is to have an equal number of male and female advocates, and to recruit more of both sexes to help meet demand. There currently is a long list of children awaiting an advocate, Shultz said.

Because strict confidentiality is a central tenant of CASA work, Watson can’t reveal specifics about the children he helps. But he did speak in generalities about perhaps his

most satisfying past case. He advocated for a 8-year-old girl as she was removed from the custody of her addicted parents after suffering terrible neglect.

“This girl was horribly affected,” he recalled. “She would urinate in the corner, smear feces on the wall, steal from other kids.”

In the course of his work on her behalf, he met with both parents, her teacher, her psychologist and her psychiatrist to gather information to make recommendations to a judge on her behalf. While state child protective service case workers and a court-appointed lawyer also make recommendations, they typically have case loads made up of dozens of children. An advocate, by contrast, focuses on only one child, or one group of siblings, at a time.

And, after completing CASA’s 50 hours of training — usually through a series of evening courses — he had unfettered access to anything he needed to understand his appointed child’s issues, even medical records.

“We do have a lot of authority,” Watson said.

In this child’s case, Watson said, he was able to draw upon his own professional experience to recommend some changes in the medications being prescribed for the girl.

He advocated on her behalf until she was finally adopted.

“For this girl, who was so disturbed and so ruined by her parents, to be rehabilitated ... ,” he said, his voice trailing off. “I saw a lot of potential in her, and there are a lot of great services available here in Lane County.”

He urged men — and women — intrigued by the idea of becoming a court-appointed advocate not to reject the idea for fear they are unqualified.

“The training is really thorough,” he said. “I learned things about drugs and addiction that I didn’t even learn in medical school.”