



**CASA**

Court Appointed Special Advocates  
**FOR CHILDREN**

# Making a Difference in the Life of a Child

BY CORINNE CHAFEY

*After Corinne Chafey retired from Head Start, she wanted to, in her words, “contribute in some substantial way to the safety and general well-being of children.” She chose Crawford County CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocates) because it involved direct services—as opposed to board and committee work—with children and she had “become aware of the many children who need someone outside their families to speak for them and advocate on their behalves.” More than three years later, she tells this story of her experiences as a CASA volunteer making a difference in the lives of two children.*

I began my work with Crawford County CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocates) in July 2008 when I picked Sam and Annie from a list of about 12 children who needed a CASA volunteer. At the time, Sam and Annie were 8 and 9 years old. They were two of the 10 children in a family that had been brought to the attention of Children and Youth Services in 2005.

To make a long and unpleasant story short, they and the other six minor children were removed from the home because of severe neglect and unsafe home conditions. Once the children were out of the home, the younger children began to reveal that they had been sexually abused by the older brothers. Later, it became clear that the sexual abuse had been pervasive, repetitive and multi-generational in this family. During this period, the parents were sent to prison on other charges.

In many ways, my experience with Sam and Annie is a story of contrasts.

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**CRAWFORD COUNTY  
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Because of the confidentiality of the work that CASA does, we use photos provided from the National CASA organization. We do not show photos of the children that Crawford County CASA serves.

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### I will tell you about Sam first.

When I met him over three years ago, he was already in his fourth foster home. Though he was a friendly little guy, and physically agile, he showed little ability to focus his attention on anything for more than a few seconds. I found that he couldn't read or even count objects reliably, although he was in the third grade. He was angry at the police for taking his parents away and daydreamed about ways to get vengeance on them.

Two months later, just as I was getting to know him, those foster parents had him removed from their home, and he was sent to a fifth foster home. His new foster mom told me on my first visit that when Sam arrived he looked around the house and asked who his new Mom was. Already, he was accustomed to getting a new "Mom" every couple of months.

I had high hopes for Sam in this foster home. His foster mom was loving and gentle and seemed firmly committed to him. In fact, Sam made it there for almost eight months—his longest stay anywhere until he wound up in a shelter a year later, where he spent over a year.

But Sam did not make it in that foster home either. Early on he had helped with household chores, responded to family rules and discipline as any slightly trying child would, and worked to keep his anger under control. But eventually he engaged in behavior so egregious that he had to be admitted to a children's psychiatric hospital twice, after he set a fire in his room and vowed to kill his foster mom and then himself. Sam, it was becoming clear, was a very troubled little boy.

There were two more foster homes, two more psychiatric admissions, two shelter care facilities, and a stint at Sarah Reed Children's Center after that. Thirteen different placements in all. During all this time, Sam has been on numerous powerful psychotropic medications to help manage his ADHD, his anxiety and depression, his anger, his moods, his inability to sleep.

Then, with much effort by Children and Youth Services, Sam was placed with pre-adoptive foster parents this past summer. Once again everyone was hopeful that Sam had at last found a place in this world. But by now a pattern had emerged. His history of doing well at first in each new placement, but eventually engaging in behavior so troubling that his foster parents couldn't tolerate it, kept repeating itself. These are classic symptoms of children with reactive attachment disorder, his newest diagnosis.

In August he was returned to Sarah Reed. He likes it there. As their consulting psychiatrist explained to me, there are lots of kindly, helpful staff there, and they all go home at night. Sam doesn't have to worry about getting too close to or too dependent on any of them.

Heartbreaking as it is, Sammy's survival is clearly a work in progress.

### But then there's Annie.

Annie was one of only two girls in that family of 10 children, and somehow I think that gave her a favored status that helped her survive. It didn't protect her from the sexual abuse, but for her the incidents were not a routine part of her life. They were a couple of isolated traumatic events.

Annie has lived in the same foster home since she was removed from her biological parents' home in early 2008. From the first time I met her she was friendly and talkative. She was quick to boast a little when she'd had a success, and quick to complain

when something in her life wasn't going well. She had many of the interests of a normal 9-year-old girl: friends, clothes, cheerleading, horses. She liked doing crafts. She professed not to like school and to hate math, but her teachers reported that she got along well there and was performing at grade level.

I would be misleading you, though, if it sounds like all was smooth sailing for her and her foster family. Annie signed up for and then quit several activities, like dance and gymnastics. Her favorite riding horse was sold when she failed to take care of it as promised. She went through numerous bouts of angry outbursts, with protracted pouting sessions afterward. She accused her foster

mom of playing favorites with the other children in the home.

Still, it was obvious that time and a healthy environment were helping to heal Annie's wounds. She continued to make progress in school, learned to accept her tutoring sessions without complaint, and started to show pride when she got a good grade. Her temper tantrums became fewer and shorter, until I rarely heard about them anymore. She got along with the other children in her foster home and, best of all, she formed a close bond with her foster parents, especially with her foster mother.

When she learned that she might be adopted by her foster family, she was ecstatic and made her foster mother a huge "I love you, Mom!" sign. She could barely wait to share the news with me and anyone else she thought would care. The adoption hasn't happened yet, but Annie's foster mom told me the other day that there are only a few more details to be worked out before it happens. I think to myself, "This child is going to make it! This child will survive!" and I feel jubilant.

### Sometimes I think about my role...

... in what has happened to Sam and Annie in the three years I've known them. I have no illusions that I am primarily responsible for the very different course that each of their lives has taken. But I do feel confident that I contributed.

For one thing, I always tried to write Reports to the Court that I thought made these children real to the judge who had to decide their fates. From the beginning, both of them had some winsome qualities, and I tried to include vignettes that depicted those qualities. I wanted my reports about Sam and Annie to supplement the fairly sterile descriptions submitted by their service providers. And often, their guardian ad litem and the judge expressed appreciation for those reports.

I also believe that, during my visits to the children in their foster homes, I often provided good counsel to the foster parents when they were struggling with the children's difficult behavior. It was certainly not my role to give them advice or direction, but I was a good listener, a good sounding board, and a sensible advocate for the better coping behaviors they were considering.

There were also numerous times, when some needed service seemed about to slip through the cracks, that I would email reminders to the children's caseworker—gently at first, and a few times more forcefully when something important failed to happen.

And then I think about this: For Sam, I am the only person in his life who has stuck with him through these last three years. Everyone else has come and gone. I see him at best once a month, and I know that Sam is not truly bonded with me in the same sense that, say, my grandchildren are. But I realized last week when I attended a team meeting for him at Sarah Reed Children's Center that the rest of the team turned to me for clarification and information about the events in Sam's life. And I realized that parents and foster parents and shelters and teachers and caseworkers and therapists all have come and gone, but I'm still here, and I'm still paying attention.

