

December 12, 2010 Editorial, reprinted here courtesy of the Star Democrat

CASA's good works

Last Tuesday, supporters of Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) of Talbot County, which includes Dorchester County, gathered in the Gold Room at the Tidewater Inn to enjoy a Celebration of Children luncheon. The theme and setting certainly was appropriate for the season of joy and giving.

Chaired by board members Stephanie Handy and Gail O'Brien, the annual thank-you luncheon for benefactors was underwritten by Anthony Walter & Duncan LLP, Bartlett Griffin & Vermilye, and The Hill Group at Morgan Stanley Smith Barney.

Dorchester Circuit Court Judge Brett Wilson, one of the guest speakers, talked about how the pilot program now in his county is having a positive effect on children who endure neglect, abuse and parents absent in spirit and in presence.

“The CASA volunteer is not burdened by the various emotions which may engulf parents, nor is that volunteer encumbered by the heavy case load attorneys face,” Judge Wilson explained to the audience. “The CASA volunteer has the most valuable of all commodities in such matters, and that is time for the child.”

He said what foster children truly need most is to feel shielded from the abuse and neglect, to feel hope, to feel as though they belong. For children living in situations in which parents worry more about their next high or their next bottle and who don't accept their parental responsibilities emotionally or financially, knowing that their CASA is there for them makes a huge difference in their lives. That person becomes their light, their strength and the person they rely on to listen to them, to try to understand them and to help them make changes.

CASAs also are obligated to provide information to the court to help give a more complete picture of a child's life, wants and needs, said Robin Davenport, executive director of CASA of Talbot County. In that way, they speak for the children and make sure their perspectives on their own situations are considered.

CASA Board member Christina Hoff, who talked candidly about her own troubled childhood, underscored the plight of children who are under the court's protection due to maltreatment.

Children struggling with verbal and physical abuse, squalor and neglect often feel no one cares, much less will listen to them. Several examples were cited how a CASA brought the child's concerns to the forefront and changed the dynamics of a circumstance or an outcome.

Talbot and Dorchester counties are indeed fortunate to have such a caring and well-respected organization in place to help and to give voice to some of the most vulnerable children in our communities. These are real kids in local homes, in local schools, in local churches looking for someone to help them, to offer them hope, a fresh start and an opportunity to experience the love, joy and acceptance most children take for granted.

If you think you'd like to become a CASA and to make a real difference in a child's life, your help would be welcome. Robin Davenport can be reached at 410-822-2866, ext. 1. She would be happy to talk with you about the work CASA does and to enlist your assistance as a volunteer or as a supporter.