

Volunteer Profile

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CASA

Court Appointed Special Advocates
FOR CHILDREN

EDITOR'S NOTE: "Making a Difference" profiles someone whose good works make our community a better place.

BY ERIN FETTIG

THE GRAND RAPIDS PRESS

Some of the things Marion Haight saw and learned during training to be a court-appointed special advocate were overwhelming. She nicknamed herself "the crier" because she couldn't hold back the tears at times.

But she knew as soon as she became involved, CASA of Kent County was where she needed to be.

It started in 2001, when Haight saw an ad for volunteers to become advocates. CASA of Kent County is part of a national organization that pairs trained volunteers with a child who has been removed from home because of abuse or neglect.

The children usually are going through court proceedings to determine whether they will be reunited with their parents or permanently removed from them.

Haight was intrigued but wasn't sure she was up to the challenge.

"It looked very interesting but daunting," Haight said. "I think I left (the ad) on my counter for three months." One day, she said, it hit her that she needed to get involved. She called CASA and signed up for the next training session.

As a CASA, she gets to know the children she works with so she can help determine what is in their best interest. She often takes them out to lunch or to a movie. She talks to their teachers,



PRESS PHOTO/ADAM BIRD

Advocate for kids: Marion Haight said she learned legal training isn't necessary to act on behalf of children as a court-appointed special advocate — "Just being a person who cares about children is enough."

family members and neighbors to get the whole story.

She attends weekly parental visits and befriends the parents, too. Charges against them often are horrific, but she doesn't pass judgment. She wants to hear all sides so she can give a truly candid report to the judge.

When she tells people where she works as a volun-

teer, she often gets the response, "That must be hard."

She doesn't think of it as hard. She thinks of it as necessary.

"I saw an opportunity to speak for the most vulnerable of our society," she said. In her six years as a CASA, she has worked on eight cases. Each has affected her life, she said. She still keeps in contact

FACT SHEET

CASA of Kent County

Agency with court-appointed special advocates

Where: 180 Ottawa Ave. NW

What: A new training session for CASA volunteers begins Oct. 2 with 30 hours of training over a four-week period.

Contact: Julie Mauer, executive director, at 632-5112, or e-mail Julie.Mauer@kentcounty.org

with many of the children with whom she's worked.

She would like to see more people volunteer as a CASA. There is a backlog of cases needing the help of an advocate.

You don't need a background in law to become a CASA, she said. She learned from experience that just being a person who cares about children is enough.

For most of her life, she was a stay-at-home mom to her four children. She now has six grandchildren.

Her work with CASA is special, said Julie Mauer, executive director, who said Haight has a knack for treating everyone in the case with respect.

"She is able to relate to all kinds of people," Mauer said.

If you know someone who is making a difference in the community, contact Your Life at 222-5585 or e-mail: yourlife@grpress.com.