

CHILDREN'S CHAMPIONS

By PHIL WRIGHT
STAFF WRITER

Alberta Akers cares for her disabled husband and son at their home in Boardman. The former school bus driver and potato plant shift coordinator decided at the age of 73 she still has the time and drive to do more.

Alberta swore the pledge Wednesday to volunteer as a court appointed special advocate for children in state foster care. Her daughter, Sariena Garrett of Heppner, also jumped into the adventure and took the pledge. Both have raised families — Alberta has two boys and two girls, and Sariena has a son and two daughters — and said they want to help foster children in their communities.

"The main thing is learning how to stand by the children and be there for them," Alberta said.

"We speak up for them," Sariena said. "We'll be the constant person in the child's life. No matter how many times they get assigned families, we'll be with that child."

Umatilla-Morrow County Head Start operates CASA, and Jesus Rome manages the program. He said CASAs are legal parties to the child's case, so they attend court proceedings and can meet with the child's lawyer and case workers. They



STAFF PHOTO BY E.J. HARRIS

Alberta Akers of Boardman and her daughter, Sariena Garrett of Heppner, both decided to become Court Appointed Special Advocates, or CASA, volunteers. CASA volunteers advocate for children in state foster care.

are responsible for observing the child and making recommendations to judges, he said, and the judges take those reports seriously. The average assignment lasts about two to two-and-half years, but can be longer.

As Sariena put it: "Once you get a kid, you need to stick with them until the end."

Just as the title indicates, they advocate for the needs of the children. Maybe they need new shoes, Sariena said, so the CASA relays that to the child's case worker or attorney. Maybe they have concerns about their foster home. The volunteer relays

that, too. But the advocates do not take on the onus of providing for the needs.

Rome said the relationship also goes beyond the courtroom. The volunteers can visit children at their schools, watch them at after-school events, visit their foster homes. The program recommends visits of at least once a month, but Alberta and Sariena said they plan to visit children more often. After all, they said, Boardman and Heppner are small towns.

The mother and daughter were among six who recently completed the program's 40 hours of training

to become CASAs, which included hearing from state social workers, judges and attorneys. They said the program stresses learning to accept cultural differences and to set aside personal opinion and beliefs to make observations and recommendations from an objective stance.

"It's a huge responsibility," Sariena said. "There's a lot we need to know. There are so many laws we need to know."

"We're going to be learning as we go," Alberta said.

But they are not going it alone. Rome said the program provides new volunteers with a CASA mentor,

a veteran who can help navigate situations that might seem overwhelming. Some of the children have complicated cases, he said, so some guidance can help a new advocate learn where to get started on a case and what to prioritize.

Alberta, Sariena and the other advocates have to keep information confidential. They cannot reveal what is going on with a child, even to their spouse. Rome said to help with that isolation, the program holds monthly meetings in Hermiston and Pendleton so the volunteers can talk and brainstorm. And there are opportunities for

more training, Rome said, which makes for better advocates.

Alberta said the program can use more volunteers.

Rome said there 43 special advocates in the two counties, and the new mother-daughter team are among the five in Morrow County. The number of children in foster care in Umatilla and Morrow counties fluctuates each month, he said, but his last count showed 170 children. The goal of the CASA program is to have one advocate per child.

"These are the highest needs kids in our communities," Rome said, and some have endured and suffered abuse and neglect. For people with time to make the commitment, Rome said it can be fulfilling work.

Sariena, who operates a home-based online retail business, said her husband told her "no" because she would want to bring the children home. She explained that is not what CASAs do. Still, she said, her husband warned she would end up with a broken heart.

He might be right, she said. Like her mother, she drove a school bus. They said they saw children in their communities who were in need.

"You really want to help every child," Sariena said, "but if I can make a difference in just one child's life it will be worth it."

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