

CASA

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parents were cleared to become her foster parents. They eventually adopted her around age 7, and continued to provide a home for other foster children. But both died within a year of each other before Duncan-Osborn was 17, leaving her to “figure out life” on her own after that.

She doesn’t remember having a CASA, but she considers herself extremely lucky to have had loving grandparents advocating for her when she was in the system.

“These kids need support, someone to stick with them,” she said. “They might go from foster home to foster home, from caseworker to caseworker, and you want someone to stick with them from start to finish and know what their story is.”

She said she remembers the disappointment of showing up to supervised visits with her mother as a young child, only to have her mother not show up. And she remembers the feelings of hopelessness that sometimes came after her grandparents were gone.

“Maybe these kids are thinking about running away, maybe they’re contemplating suicide,” she said. “I want to tell them ‘I was there and look at me now.’”

In addition to her own experiences, Duncan-Osborn said she learned a lot from the training classes she and the rest of her class of CASAs took. They learned about coping mechanisms for dealing with difficult cases, learned about the legal system and took field trips to talk to everyone from judges to a mother who was in rehabilitation as she tried to win her children back.

“It really helps you see all sides,” she said.



STAFF PHOTO BY E.J. HARRIS

A new class of CASA volunteers pose for a photo with Umatilla County Circuit Court Judge Eva Temple after a swearing in ceremony for the new volunteers Tuesday in Hermiston.

Many CASAs don’t have such a direct connection to the foster system, but decided they could give back to their community by being an advocate for some of society’s most vulnerable children.

“These kids need support, someone to stick with them. They might go from foster home to foster home...”

Meagan Duncan-Osborn, CASA

Jimmie Wilkins of Pendleton said now that she is retired she has more time. She volunteers in hospice, helping people at the end of their lives, and she decided she wanted to do something to help those at the beginning too.

She said she was shocked to learn how few foster families there are in the area.

“Now when I’m at the gym or getting coffee and CASA comes up I say, ‘Do you know Pendleton only has three foster placements?’” she said.

She said being a CASA will be a challenge but she’s ready to put her Type-A personality to use in being the most effective advocate she can, with the help of Umatilla Morrow County Head Start staff and the more-experienced CASA assigned to be her mentor.

During Monday’s swearing-in ceremony in a Hermiston courtroom, Judge Eva Temple thanked the new CASAs for their willingness to give of their time. She said CASAs are “of great help” to those tasked with determining what is best for the child.

“I don’t know if you understand how much the CASA reports are valued by the court,” she said.

CASAs must go through at least 30 hours of training, but CASAs in Umatilla and Morrow County usually go through 40 to 50, as UMCHS supplements the national curriculum with field trips to local sites

related to foster care. Some CASAs only take one case at time, while more experienced ones with time on their hands can take several. They are expected to meet with the child and discuss how things are going a minimum of once a month, attend court hearings, provide reports to the court and do whatever else they think will help them be an advocate for the child. Sometimes that includes things like referring the child’s parent to parenting classes and other resources to help them be the best option for their child going forward. Other times it means reporting to the court that they believe the child would be in danger if they return home.

Diane Shockman, Hermiston’s CASA coordinator, said the CASAs’ reports become an official part of the court record. CASAs are also able to access records related to the child’s case.

For more information about CASA in Umatilla and Morrow counties, email casa@umchs.org or call Shockman at 541-667-6169.

MEAL

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“Being a couple of months in advance makes it so much easier when dealing with volunteers and the donated dollar,” Cassens said.

This year, there were at least 100 volunteers total, about 30 of which were helping in the kitchen. They cooked mashed potatoes, carved turkey and plated pies.

The event has been going on for more than 30 years, but draws new helpers annually.

Many of the kitchen volunteers were learning on the job Thursday morning.

“Someone dropped off a poster at my work,” said Salvador Zeferino, a new volunteer who was arranging plates of pie on a serving rack. “I just wanted to spend time and help out in any way I can.”

He said he hoped more people would show up to help, and to eat.

“I think it’s important that everyone volunteer,” he said. “Not everyone’s fortunate enough to have family to go to. It’s understanding that, and helping out.”

Mike Chrismon and his 16-year-old granddaughter, Kora Tretteen, showed up on Thursday morning ready to help. They quickly got to work in the kitchen, helping prep mashed potatoes.

“I heard about this through the high school,” Tretteen said. “It’s something people are really proud of.”

Cassens and Smart are both longtime volunteers, and both fell into their roles unexpectedly.

“Five years ago, I walked in and they said ‘Oh yay, a cook,’” Smart said. “I just started cooking from the beginning.”

Though she had prior

experience in the kitchen, Smart said she wasn’t ready for the volume of food they have to prepare for the meal.

This year, she wasn’t able to work as usual — she was sidelined by a burst calf muscle, and pushed herself around the room in a wheelchair, advising and directing other volunteers where she could.

Cassens has been there for 17 years, and said she’s enjoyed seeing the families that come back.

“We must be on third generation now,” she said.

Tom Marks, who was carving turkeys, said he joined in 1992.

“I started out with a fellow who used me as his seeing-eye dog,” Marks said. “He was blind from macular degeneration. But he still cut turkeys faster and better than anyone.”

Smart said they hope to bring more people in, especially now that they have the meal at the high school — a larger venue than the senior center.

Community businesses also contributed to the meal. Safeway sold turkeys at a discounted price, and Walmart and Fiesta Foods both donated items. Shari’s donated pies.

As the clock ticked closer to 11, more volunteers got busy, carrying plates of food and chatting with guests.

Jason Haigh said this was his first year volunteering, and that his wife had told him about the event.

He was carrying cups of tea and coffee to a couple of veterans seated at a table, and spent some time talking with them.

“They’re telling me stories about serving our country,” he said.

Haigh said he was pleased to be helping out.

“It’s about family, and making sure everyone’s happy,” he said. “Creating those smiles.”

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