



GAL

Guardian ad Litem

A POWERFUL VOICE FOR
FLORIDA'S CHILDREN

FLORIDA GUARDIAN AD LITEM
PROGRAM

Florida Guardian ad Litem Program “A Voice Heard” 2012 Status Report





To Listen (*verb*) - to take heed; to pay attention.

Throughout my twenty years of advocating for children, I have learned that LISTENING is the most important skill in child advocacy. Listening, which also includes understanding, empathizing, and learning, is the foundational building block required to meet the needs of youth who are abused, abandoned or neglected - the children being served by the Florida Guardian ad Litem Program (Program) and its Guardian ad Litem (GAL) volunteers.

The “A Voice Heard” Initiative (Initiative) provides the opportunity to listen to the voices of some of these children as they talk about the tireless work of their GAL volunteers and the important role their GAL volunteer plays in their lives.

The role of the Program and its GAL volunteers has been enhanced over the years. Originally, the Program was “under” the court system. GAL volunteers were limited to meeting the needs of the judiciary by writing a report with recommendations to the court. Their responsibilities did not include providing any direct services to the child. This limited view of the GAL’s role was reinforced by the Florida Supreme Court. On January 28, 1997, an Administrative Order was issued by the Chief Justice of the Florida Supreme Court entitled “In Re: Guardian Ad Litem Program Transportation Policy.” The order stated that “[T]he guardian ad litem is a court advocate only; the guardian ad litem’s responsibilities do not include providing direct services to children whose interests they have been appointed to represent.”

It became clearer, that the value of the Program were the GAL volunteers. Seeing this, the Legislature expanded the responsibilities of the GAL volunteers. The Program was moved from out of the courts to be more independent. Education laws were reformed allowing GALs to become educational surrogates for children, so they were no longer “court advocates only.”

The volunteers have always inherently understood the need for an expanded role for themselves in the lives of the children they serve. While working with the Program’s exceptional volunteers, I have come to appreciate that GALs have a tremendous passion for what they do. Children understand this, too. When an elementary school child was asked why their GAL visited them, she answered “because you love me.” A high school youth stated that his GAL “gives me inspirational speeches to try to keep me out of trouble.” These are heartfelt words from children in the most difficult time of their young lives.

I express my sincere appreciation to the Circuit Directors, staff members, volunteers, and children in Circuits 1, 2, 3, 5, 9 and 17 who contributed to this Initiative. Their participation is valued and appreciated. I especially want to recognize volunteer, Bonnie Marmor, Ph.D. in Strategic Planning, who led our team and put this report together. Their individual and collective efforts will help define the direction of the Guardian ad Litem Program in future years and will provide guidance as the Program moves forward to ensure that every child has a voice and someone to ensure their well-being.

Please listen to these valuable voices. Let’s all pay special attention to the children.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Alan F. Abramowitz". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.

Alan F. Abramowitz

February 9, 2012

THE “A VOICE HEARD INITIATIVE” EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The “A Voice Heard” Initiative (Initiative) was designed to listen to the voices of children in foster care to better understand their experiences in working with a Guardian ad Litem (GAL) volunteer and the expectations they have of the GAL volunteer with whom they have contact. The information was obtained from informal conversations between GAL volunteers in six of Florida’s Judicial Circuits and one hundred and fifty-two (152) elementary, middle and high school students, as well as youth who have left the foster care system at age 18 (aged out).

It was consistently confirmed that the bond between a GAL volunteer and the child(ren) with whom the volunteer spends time is built on the following key elements:

1. Communication: Talking, Listening and Understanding
2. Personal Interest: Caring and Concern
3. Support: Emotional and Material
4. Trust: Openness and Honesty

The children/youth participating in these conversations seemed to picture their GAL volunteer as a friend, mentor, counselor, teacher, advocate, supporter, and cheerleader. This Initiative realizes two outcomes: (1) it documents the success of the Guardian ad Litem Program and the work of its volunteers and (2) it also provides the opportunity for children in foster care to guide the direction of the Guardian ad Litem Program and to improve the organization’s ability to meet the child(ren)’s needs.



I am for the child.

“A Voice Heard”

A Guardian ad Litem Youth Initiative

Interim Report

Note: The name for the Initiative was proposed by a former foster youth, Brian Williams. Brian has recently been accepted into the Fostering Achievement Fellowship Program at Tallahassee Community College, the Program is extremely proud of Brian for his accomplishments.

The “A Voice Heard” Initiative provides the opportunity to listen to the voices of foster care youth and former foster care youth as they give their opinions about the tireless work of their Guardian ad Litem volunteer and the important role their GAL volunteer plays in their life.

GAL volunteers represent so much more to a child than just being their court advocate. The GAL volunteer often becomes a role model, a mentor, an educational surrogate, a friend, a confidant, and most important, a consistent caring person on whom the child(ren) can rely. Children will tell you, in their own words, how their GAL volunteer talks with them, relates to them and cares about them.

Listening to these voices, you will hear about the ways in which GAL volunteers have been able to meet children’s needs, wishes and expectations. GAL volunteers ensure that they have a birthday party (sometimes their first one!), have a Christmas gift to open on Christmas morning, or the ability to visit their family members and friends....just like every other child does.

Listening to their voices, you will hear that Florida is fortunate to have the Guardian ad Litem Program (Program) to ensure that all children in our child dependency and foster care system have someone who respects them and regards each child as a special, unique person who deserves a bright future.

“A Voice Heard” Initiative Goal

The goal of the “A Voice Heard” Initiative is to gain a better understanding of Florida’s foster care youths’ expectations and experiences with their GAL volunteer. The Program will use the Initiative’s results to:

1. Assist GAL volunteers to develop a better understanding of the foster care youth they represent.
2. Enable GAL volunteers to effectively address the youth’s needs.
3. Allow the children in foster care to advise and guide the direction of the Program.
4. Improve the Program’s ability to meet foster care youth needs in a multitude of ways.
5. Train GAL volunteers and Program staff.
6. Share Initiative results with child welfare advocates system wide.

Framework

The framework for the “A Voice Heard” Initiative was based on the Program’s mission statement, core values and strategic plan. The Program’s mission is to ***advocate for the child’s best interest is our only interest.*** One purpose of the Initiative is to better advocate for abused and neglected children through listening to children’s needs and experiences.

The Program can better understand what really is important to the children represented and will be better equipped to represent their best interests. The Initiative will also give the Program an understanding of how youth’s experiences with their GAL volunteer can define the expectations of all GAL volunteers in the future.

In its Strategic Plan, the Program has stated its primary goal is ***to assure that every child has a voice in court.*** The Initiative pairs this goal with the Program’s core value statement that GAL has a ***commitment to children and communication built on trust.*** This core value demands the Program listen to both children currently in foster care and former foster care youth. The child’s voice must serve as the foundation for the child’s expectations of their GAL volunteer and even the Program as a whole.

The insights gained from the Initiative will become integral to the statewide training of GAL volunteers, Program staff, community stakeholders, and will be shared with child advocates in a diversity of settings and venues. In sum, GAL volunteers' effectiveness will be further strengthened through listening to children's voices and understanding their expectations. The lessons learned in the Initiative will be incorporated into the Program's Strategic Plan and future operations.

Information Gathering

The information throughout this report was obtained through conversations between GAL volunteers and foster youth in six of Florida's Judicial Circuits which were designated as participants in the Initiative. The participating circuits represent urban, suburban and rural counties. A total of one hundred and fifty-two (152) elementary, middle and high school students, as well as former foster youth, were asked a series of questions to determine their experiences with, and expectations of, their GAL volunteer.

GAL volunteers posed specific questions directly to the children with whom they are currently working or with whom they had previously worked. Having the child's own GAL volunteer question the child was an approach used for two reasons:

1. To enable GAL volunteers to learn how they could become more effective by gaining insights directly from the children they represent, and
2. To not treat children impersonally by introducing strangers into their lives.

Questions posed to the children/youth were developed in consultation with a child psychologist to ensure suitability.

The responses to each of the questions from all four survey groups were reviewed and analyzed for common themes. What follows is a question-by-question summary of children's "voices" expressing their thoughts about working with a GAL volunteer. Rather than the Initiative being a formal research project, it was developed to serve as an informal way to better understand the aspects of the relationship between a GAL volunteer and a child, and how that relationship can be strengthened.

INTERIM REPORT

Children and youth of all ages repeatedly provide examples of how important a GAL volunteer has been in their life. The work done by GAL volunteers as explained by the children themselves is an indisputable tribute to the success of GAL volunteer dedication and excellence in their advocacy. Below are the answers given by children to their GAL volunteer. The answers are divided by age group – elementary, middle and high school students and finally, former foster youth.

Elementary School Students (Grades K-5)

Question #1: What is the most important thing I do to help you?

- ❖ Help me. Fifteen children referred to several areas in which help was received.

Academics and reading: “you help me do my homework.”

Reunification with one or more parents or getting in contact with family members: “you helped me get back to my daddy’s house.”

Mental health or medical needs: “you helped me... by checking my medications...get a new therapist...get new glasses when I couldn’t see the board.”

Emotional support: “you helped me... keep my confidence...feel better and not be so sad.”



- ❖ Talk to me. Several children specifically mentioned how much they enjoyed just talking with their GAL volunteer and even mentioned what they discussed.

“You ask me how things are going.”

“You talk to me about my family.”

“You encourage me to do the right things.”

“You talk with me and my brother and sisters to make us feel comfortable where we are.”

- ❖ Visit me. Face-to-face contact with a GAL volunteer is also significant to a number of the children.

“You come to see me and play with me.”

“You check on me and make sure I am OK.”

“You come to my basketball games and cheer for me.”

“You come and get our minds off stuff and do stuff with us.”

“You taught me how to carve a pumpkin.”

Question #2: What other things would you like me to do for you?

- ❖ Help me. Some of the children’s responses indicated additional ways the GAL volunteer could assist the child. Children asked for help in their personal development, family situation, academic growth, and daily living.

Family:

“Help me...find a mommy and daddy.”

“See if my mom and I can live together.”

“Arrange for my siblings to spend the night.”

“See my sister out of state, have more sibling visits, and make sure a pre-adoptive family is a good family.”

“Help my brother and sister with doing the right thing.”

Personal Development:

“Help me...with my behavior- I am getting into trouble for my humor and bad behavior.”

“Help me to tie my shoes, show me which shoes go on which foot.”

Academic Growth:

“Help me... to learn and raise my grade.”

“Help me to do reading with practice tests.”

“Help me with my math.”

Daily Living:

“Help me...with food and lights.”

- ❖ Play with me. Several children proposed additional activities they would enjoy doing with their GAL volunteer.

Activities that could be done at the child’s home:

“Go trick-or-treating with me.”

“Do my hair...play Barbie’s...play games together... play Checkers with me.”

Attending school events:

“Come watch me play football.”

“Come to school to see my party coming up.”

“Come have lunch with me.”

Going places:

“I wish you could take me out to places so I don’t have to be here all the time with you. Like maybe a park or store or something.”

Other suggestions were being taken to the beach or to Universal Studios.

Question #3: If there was one thing you could wish for today, what would it be?

- ❖ Reunification. A few children responding to this question want to be reunited with their mom, their dad, a sibling, or their entire family.

One seven year old seemed to represent the feelings of this group when he stated, “to get back with my mommy - that is my only wish.”

Another eleven year old was happy to report, “I already got my wish...to come home.”

A variation on this wish was expressed by another eleven year old who said, “to be adopted by my aunt and uncle right now. I don’t want to have to keep waiting.”

- ❖ Material possessions. Not surprisingly, a good number of these younger children have a clear idea of what is on their wish list. Items included: an iPhone, a scooter with a wheel in front and back, a new DS charger, a Barbie doll with red, blue and purple hair, a Bratz doll, a puppy, and chocolate ice cream. One pragmatic responder just indicated “money” so he could buy a house and a car.

- ❖ Miscellaneous. Not falling into either of the above categories, a few of the expressed wishes took on a more personal note.

Two children want to expand their life experiences - “I want to go places – anywhere; I want to go to the museum – any type of museum;”

Two wanted their own bedroom; and

One wanted “to be good and get my school work done.”

The most poignant of the wishes was the ten year old who wished that “all of this

would get done soon.”

Question #4: Why do you think I come to see you?

- ❖ You care about me and my safety. Quite a few children responding to this question believe that the GAL volunteer is interested in their safety. These children said their GAL volunteer came to see them to make sure they were safe.

“You come to check on me.”

“You come to make sure that I am OK.”

“To tell the Judge I am OK.”

“To see how I am doing.”

“To make sure everything is going well.”

“To see if I am happy.”

“To make sure I don’t get hurt.”

“To make sure I am safe.”

Obvious from many of the children’s answers was they sincerely believe the GAL volunteer cares about them *personally*. These children said that their GAL volunteers come:

“To make sure I go to school each day.”

“To make sure I get good grades.”

“Because you love and care for me and to help me with my problems.”

“Because you think I am a real neat kid - you tell me that a lot.”

“Because you care.”

“Because you love me.”



- ❖ To talk with me. As with Question #1, communication with the GAL volunteer is a key part of the volunteer-child relationship. Several children responded to this question by mentioning the value they place on being able to share feelings and information with their GAL volunteer.

As one eleven year old stated: “I like to talk to you and communicate. You explain what is going on in life. You help us be good kids.”

Similar thoughts were expressed by a ten year old who said: “you talk about good things to us. We talk about feelings and help me work that out.”

A nine year old was not too young to appreciate that “you give me information that nobody else gives me.”

- ❖ To help me. This question provided still another opportunity for the elementary school children to state their belief that their GAL volunteer comes to see them to assist them with activities related to their current circumstances.

General terms:

“To help me what (sic) I want in life.”

“So you can get more information about us so you can help us.”

Physical well-being:

“To help me count my pills.”

“To help with something we need like glasses.”

“To help us get new and/or eatable (sic) stuff.”

“To see my room.”

Family situation:

“To help us about the divorce thing with my parents.”

“To make sure me and my sister has (sic) a good family.”

Secretary Wilkins, from the Department of Children and Families stated, “The challenge of providing all of Florida’s children with the opportunity to dream of a better future is enormous. But it is truly the highest of moral callings and it requires the work of our Department, our community partners, businesses, and volunteers. I have repeatedly seen first-hand the impact of a volunteer guardian ad litem on a child’s life and the rewards are great for the child, the volunteer and our state’s future. I encourage any Floridian who wishes to help a child to volunteer with the Guardian ad Litem Program. The impact one person can have is incredible.”

Middle School Students (Grades 6 through 8)

Question #1: What do you enjoy most about my visits with you?

- ❖ You talk with me and listen to me. Much like elementary school children, middle school children also place a high value on being able to talk to their GAL volunteer. Middle school respondents, however, put emphasis on being able to have a conversation - a give and take - with their GAL volunteer. Pre-teens and young teens shifted their perspective from the GAL volunteer talking to them to their own ability to communicate with their GAL volunteer. Pre-teens also expressed the importance of being heard by their GAL volunteer. Some of the more articulate respondents expressed the trust and confidence they have in their GAL volunteer which enables them to express their feelings and discuss serious issues.



“The time we spend talking.”

“I can convey my thoughts and confide in you.”

“I can trust talking to you.”

“Having someone to talk to about stuff like what is going to happen to me and my sister.”

“Someone who listens to what I have to say.”

“I could talk to you about anything I want ...and you talk to me about what I am going through. You make me feel like a person.”

Several children view the relationship they have with their GAL volunteer as a personal one - a relationship that involves a special connection.

“You always seem so happy to see me and I can tell that you really like me.”

“You seem very interested in me and show that you care about my future.”

“I am happy to see your face.”

- ❖ You cheer me up and give me good advice. Developmentally, middle school children, pre-teens and teens are going through intense emotional turmoil. When their personal turmoil also includes involvement with the dependency system, it is not surprising that several children mentioned that their GAL volunteer is fun, lifts their spirits and keeps them centered.

“You laugh with me and give me good advice – Even when I’m mad at you, you make me happy and help me keep my head up.”

“You joke around and listen to me.”

“We laugh about a lot of silly stuff.”

“You keep telling me to find something good in everything – that’s hard but I try.”

“We have fun and enjoy ourselves. It clears my mind of all the bad things because we have fun. Also, when it’s time to be serious, you always do the important stuff, too.”



- ❖ You spend time with me. Many of the middle school children made specific mention of enjoying being with their GAL volunteer doing “stuff.” Whether talking, playing video games, meeting at the mall and “hanging out,” looking at the child’s latest photographs, polishing their nails together, playing games, or doing crafts – all of which were mentioned - there is a real sense the child looks forward to sharing time and activities with their GAL volunteer.

Question #2: Why do you think I come to see you?

- ❖ Concern for my welfare. Many of the children responding to this question overwhelmingly voiced the same sentiments.

“Because you care about me... To make sure I am OK.”

“To see how I am doing and to see if I am in good care.”

“To make sure nobody does mean stuff to us.”

“To make sure I am OK in my foster home and to see if I want to tell the Judge anything.”

“To make sure I am eating.”

“To see if I need anything.”

“For the well-being of my safety and health and that you care about me. Also, to see if I’m progressing in my responsibilities and outlook on life.”

- ❖ To help me. Going beyond simple oversight of their safety, many children saw the GAL volunteer’s role as proactive, i.e., providing specific assistance to them. As some children were obviously becoming aware of court proceedings, there was an expectation that the GAL volunteer could be an intermediary with the court.

“To know what I want to happen in court...I can tell you what I want.”

“Give me a voice to the court and tell them how we feel.”

“Tell the judge what I want.”

Others were seeking *personal help*:

“You go to court so I will get a home where people love me.”

“To help (us) through the process (of adoption) and understand what is happening, and if we changed our mind about what we want.

“To help me solve my problems.”

Question #3: What is the most important thing I do to help you?

- ❖ Deal with my feelings. Judging from the responses to this question, the disruption of being involved in the dependency system often precipitates emotional confusion in middle school youth. Their responses reveal they are conflicted about their situation and rely upon the GAL volunteer to help them sort out their feelings. Some youth are satisfied if their GAL volunteer just lets them talk about their feelings.

“You listen to what I have to say and you get that things are important to me.”

“Spend time with us and listen to what we say about grades, friends, and father. You just listen to what we say and do not tell us stuff.”

Others want, and are able to have, a more in-depth conversation.

“(You) help me understand and answer questions I have about why my Dad and brother and Mom are the way they are.”

“You don’t mind if I cry and act upset and you understand how I feel and you explain why other people act the way they do – like my mom can’t help how she is and that she does love me.”

“When I tell my GAL I’m about to do something bad/wrong, my GAL says she is coming and she does.”

“She could help me to why (sic) I feel sad or I need to talk. We talk things through – she help (sic) me to understand and be there when needed – losing my mom was sad and D--- (GAL) was right there.”

“Try to help me get through my life and make me a better person.”

- ❖ Speak for me in court. As mentioned in the summary of responses to Question #2-B, middle school children responding to this questionnaire seem to have more of an understanding of court proceedings. Pre-teens and teens have a better understanding of the GAL volunteer’s role as an advocate in judicial procedures. For example:

“You tell the Judge my wishes and sometimes make an appointment with the Judge to talk to him privately.”

“Helps me in court, helps the Judge know how I feel, and makes sure I can talk to the Judge.”

“Make sure they bring me to court.”

“You helped me by convincing the Judge to place me with my aunt. Now I am being adopted by my aunt.”

“Helping me and my sisters be TPR’d (termination of parental rights) because going back to that wouldn’t have been good. Also, being present when we learned that the Judge had terminated my parents’ rights - that was important to me.”

Question #4: What other things would you like me to do for you?

- ❖ Nothing really. . . Maybe spend more time with me/take me places. Fifteen of the forty-four children responding to this question had no further suggestions regarding what could be done for them. Perhaps one of the largest compliments to GAL volunteers is that several of these children indicated they are already satisfied with what their GAL volunteer does for them.

“GAL does enough. There is nothing else she could do. GAL does everything.”

“You are doing great. I wouldn’t want to change anything.”

A further compliment to the role a GAL volunteer plays in a child's life is that an additional twelve students said that they wanted to spend more time with their GAL volunteer.

"I'd like to have you around more often."

"I would like for you to come visit on the weekend so we could spend more time together."

One thirteen year-old expressed a real commitment to her GAL volunteer: "I want you to be able to see me forever or at least until I get married."

Five of those who expressed a desire to spend more time with their GAL volunteer specifically mentioned that they wanted their GAL volunteer to be able to take them places "without relying on someone else." Among the proposed destinations were: an ice cream shop; a movie; my ballgame 'so you could watch me play;' (somewhere) to play video games; Legoland 'because you have done Legos with me forever;' Wild Adventure; and a skating rink.

- ❖ Help me with my family situation. No matter what difficulties the children experience in their home life, there is the hope on the part of several respondents that the GAL volunteer could help them keep in contact with family members from whom they are separated:

"I would like to see my brothers more often."

"I want to be with my Mom and big brother from Tennessee...occasionally see my Dad."

"I want to get my Dad out of jail and get my older brother to come visit me."

Other respondents were hoping for help improving their current living environment:

"To get my aunt to let me have more friends and privacy and fun and more opportunity."

"To live with my grandmother."

"To get help for my family."

"To speed up adoption."

Question #5: If you were a GAL, is there anything special you would do for the person you visit?

- ❖ Be just like you. The impact that a GAL volunteer has on a child's life cannot be overestimated. If a GAL volunteer has any doubt that their efforts are valued and appreciated by the children they advocate for, the following representative quotes should dispel that notion.

“Make sure they know I am always there for them like you do.”

“I would do what my GAL does, get to know them, spend time with them.”

“Be like you – listen- bring them things to cheer them up and put a smile on their faces – also call them like you do just to check up on their school work and see what happened to them since you came to their house.”

“I would stop by and see if there is any problem that they need to solve - I will be there. Everything you do for me – you do a lot – offer friendship and comfort.”

“Treat them nice like I have been treated.”

“I would be just like you. I want to be a GAL when I grow up so kids know someone really cares.”

- ❖ Miscellaneous. Although pre-teens and teens are often accused of being too self-involved to think of others, the characteristics specified in the responses to this question portray a very sensitive side of this group of children. It is probable that the qualities identified are significant “needs and wants” in the life of that child as well as those behaviors modeled by their own GAL volunteer – listening, caring, helping, guiding, and spending time.

“Bring snacks and make sure they had a place to sleep and food to eat.”

“Listen carefully to the child.”

“Make them feel like they were special.”

“I would help them get better. I would help them with their problems and make them be a better person.”

“Help them get out of trouble with the law.”

“I would tell them there is a lot you can do in life and don't make the wrong decisions.”

“I would do everything I could for them til I get them happy.”

“I would treat them with respect and help them as much as possible.”



“Many children in our state are alone in the big, wide world—with no one on their side, no one looking out for them, no one to protect their best interests. Some fortunate children have guardians ad litem on their side, making decisions to protect them and look out for them— to truly transform a child’s future. Please, please consider learning more about the Guardian ad Litem Program and the great things they do. Time, money and prayers— pick one or all three, but do something so that every precious child who needs a guardian ad litem will receive one.”
Senator Ronda Storms

High School Students (Grades 9 through 12)

Question #1: What do you enjoy most about my visits with you?

- ❖ You listen to me and accept me. Once again, the importance of a GAL volunteer being a communicator – listening, hearing, understanding, and talking – is ultimately one of the most important aspects of the GAL volunteer role. Virtually all of the thirty-nine high school respondents are very clear about how meaningful it is to be able to talk with their GAL volunteer. High school students place great importance on their GAL volunteer taking an interest in their activities and accepting them as they are.



“I get to talk about anything I want and just chill out and have a discussion about everything. (I feel) comfortable enough to talk about a variety of topics without worrying about getting into trouble.”

“Talking about anything and you not getting angry with me.”

“Talking about school and football. You take an interest in my classes and sports.”

“My Guardian has been very consistent when visiting in talking about school which motivates me.”

“The ability to spend time talking about different things with someone who cares what I have to say.”

- ❖ I like you and I trust you. Many responses to this question reflect the honest dialogue which takes place between the GAL volunteer and the teens they represent. High school age youth conveyed the importance of the connection and bond, built on trust and caring, with their GAL volunteer.

“I can tell you anything and I can trust you. Also I get to vent.”

“You laugh at my jokes; you are fun and listen to me. I can tell you whatever I want because I can trust you.”

“I am able to express my thoughts and concerns freely and you listen to me. You constantly help me with questions I have with (sic) Independent Living, etc.”

“My volunteer actually took time to get to know me.”

“Your nice personality and loving heart. You do things in a caring manner. I see that when you make your visits that you really care and it’s not just about your job.”

Question #2: Why do you think I come to see you?

- ❖ To check on me. Similar to many of the middle school children, a number of high school teens believe the GAL volunteer visits them to check on their safety and well-being and because they care about them.

“Because you have concern and your goal is to keep us safe.”

“To make sure there is no trouble and to keep me safe.”

“To make sure I’m in the best place and receive those things that will help me function better.”

Some responses, however, reflect an understanding that the GAL volunteer wants information about the progress the teen is making and how they are coping and adjusting to their current situation.

“To make sure I am doing OK.”

“To see how things are going with me.”

“To make sure everything is going the way it’s supposed to.”

Some of the statements are more specific.

“To see if I’m going to counseling.”

“To see how my visits are going with my parents.”

“To make sure that I still want to stay with my Dad and Step-Mom...to find out about visits with my Mom and grandparents.”

“You are concerned about what will happen to me and my brothers and sisters.”

- ❖ To inform and prepare me. Not surprisingly, many teens viewed the presence of a GAL volunteer as being connected to their case. Some students believe that the visits from their GAL volunteer are correlated with court appearances.

“Because I have to be in court with my parents.”

“Because me (sic) and my baby have to be in court.”

More often, GAL volunteers' visits are seen as related to preparing them for the ongoing legal proceedings.

"Give me a better understanding of the legal system and what's going on."

"Keep me updated with the progress of my case."

"To give me court information and to tell the Judge how I am doing and to tell the Judge my wishes."

A small number of the high school students made particular mention that their GAL volunteer prepared them for their future.

"So we can talk about what I need to accomplish when I turn 18 and about what I want to do with my life."

"Because I will be living on my own soon and you want to make sure I'm going to be OK."

"To help me with college."

Question #3: What is the most important thing I do to help you?

❖ You are there for me. The responses to this question reflect the genuine appreciation the teens have for the trusting and open relationship established with their GAL volunteer. Once again there is frequent mention of the GAL volunteer being there to talk, to listen, and to help. What is communicated even more definitely is the appreciation the teens have for the unflinching emotional support provided to them by their GAL volunteer. Most often cited is that the GAL volunteer serves as a "safety net" and "moral compass."

"Make sure I stay on track and do what I'm supposed to do."

"Give me inspirational speeches to try to keep me out of trouble."

"Help me with my placements and see how I'm doing to help me do things better."

"Come and see me and when I'm mad or sad - you are always there to put a smile on my face."

The support provided by the GAL volunteer is often linked to a specific outcome.

". . . when I was in jail, putting some money in my commissary."

"You helped me to get out of a group home into a foster family and to get me in the GED program."

“Help me to be able to live on my own. You tell me that I can achieve if I believe – no matter what.”

“I had a lot of questions about what could happen in court and what it means. You explained and made me feel comfortable enough to speak up when the Judge asked me if I had anything to say.”

One seventeen year old summarized her appreciation for all the emotional and tangible support she received from her GAL volunteer.

“It’s already been done...I am aging out with a life, a job, and a new family.”

- ❖ Miscellaneous. Several of the teens also took the opportunity to identify other areas of assistance which are significant to them.

“Giving me advice about taking care of my baby.”

“To get a job and a place to live when I turn 18.”

“Keeping me informed.”

“Giving me advice about college.”

Question #4: What other things would you like me to do for you?

- ❖ Nothing now...Maybe help me with my future/keep in contact. It should first be noted that a number of the respondents to this question did not offer any suggestions for additional help. Many answered the question simply by saying: “Nothing at this point.” This question led to many children offering their feelings about their GAL volunteer.

“You are here for me. You care. If I need a book or project done, you help me.”

“You stand up for me in court.”

“I feel (my) GAL does enough but I know if I needed anything I wouldn’t hesitate to ask.”

“To continue to be informative.”

Some of the teens, however, are already looking ahead to their future....thinking about the time they will age out of the dependency system. They express the hope that their GAL volunteer will help equip them for life on their own.

“Make sure I get set up when I age out and get my own apartment.”

“Help me decorate.”

“Help me for when I turn 18 to find a place to stay.”

“Stay in contact with me when I turn 18.”

“Keep me motivated in reaching my goals and with school.”

“Help me with DJJ (Department of Juvenile Justice) court issues.”

One wistful sixteen year old just stated: “I want you to keep believing in me.”

- ❖ To Help Me Be Normal. A common theme underlying many of the responses to Question #4 was the wish for experiences or opportunities which would bring some degree of normalcy to their life. Some of these “wants” implicitly or explicitly involved being able to be transported by their GAL volunteer.

“I’d like to learn how to swim and go fishing.”

“I would like to go shopping and have a meal together.”

“I wish you could pick me up and go do things.”

“Help me to get a driver’s license to be a normal kid.”

“Help me get clothes for homecoming...help me get into Daytona Community College.”

“Help speed up the adoption.”



Question #5: If you were a GAL, is there anything special you would do for the person you visit?

- ❖ Do all the things you do for me. High school teens reference their GAL volunteer as the kind of volunteer that they, themselves, would like to be.

“I would do everything you do.”

“I would try to help them anyway I could. I would give them my time, like you do and really listen to me.”

“I would encourage them to stay strong and keep doing the right things until they can get back with their family. I would just help them out like you’ve always helped me.”

“Just spend quality time with them.”

Even if the response does not specifically reference a GAL volunteer, the behaviors that the respondents mention are those which are, in all probability, learned from their own GAL volunteer and which they value and would like to emulate.

“Be a friend.”

“To make that person feel comfortable and at ease. To listen carefully.”

“I’d make them feel like they matter.”

“Try my hardest to motivate and guide my client socially and academically.”

“Learn as much as I can about the person in order to understand them.”

“Just be there for the kid.”

- ❖ Make their life better. Making someone else’s life better is a broad concept, but several teens were clear that they view this responsibility as an important part of the GAL volunteer’s role.

“I would do whatever is necessary and in my power to make that person’s life better.”

Happiness, fun, and food all were proposed as strategies for improving someone’s circumstances.

“I think I would do what I could to make them happy.”

“I would...do fun activities.”

“Bake them cookies and make them feel special.”

“Make sure my kids are always happy in a happy home and good state of mind.”

One seventeen year old had a very special and important contribution to helping someone feel better – “ensure that the kids got to keep their pets.” In her case, when the police first arrived, this child’s pet, an indoor declawed Himalayan cat, escaped through an open door that was left open. She was not permitted to look for the pet which the child was sure would not survive on its own. According to the GAL volunteer, the child is still mourning the loss of her pet after ten months.

- ❖ Take them places. Being able to transport their “client” was also viewed by some of the respondents as something they would like to do for/with their “client.” Perhaps using this question as a means of introducing an option they miss in their current relationship with their GAL volunteer – the opportunity for normalcy – a few of the teens indicated that they would take their client places.

“Take the person places.”

“Take them to lunch or dinner in a real restaurant.”

“I would take my kids to different places they have never been.”



I am for the child.

Former Foster Youth (Youth Who Have Aged Out: Ages 18-23)

Question #1: Tell me whatever you can remember about your GAL and his/her visits with you.



- ❖ My GAL volunteer was...nice, caring, helpful. The recollection former foster youth have of their GAL volunteer is a very positive one. The personality characteristics described are of a person to whom the youth:

“Could talk to about anything.”

“Who paid attention to what I had to say.”

“Who checked on my needs.”

“(Who) brought me school and household necessities that I needed.”

“Always fought for what I wanted.”

“Was very supportive and caring.”

“When I was having a bad day, always cheered me up.”

- ❖ The GAL volunteer visits were...reassuring to me. Visits by their GAL volunteer are remembered as effectively mitigating the uncertainties and challenges these youth were experiencing.

“I ran away but (my) GAL came regularly to my residential placement.”

“(My GAL) came to see me when family members weren’t able to come and visit me.”

“The visits were informational.”

“I was in school and pregnant. I was able to talk about the baby with her.”

“To spend quality time that others couldn’t spend.”

“She helped me figure out whatever I needed to do to be successful when I got out on my own.”

“(I appreciated) having someone to talk to -- know someone is thinking about me and coming to see me.”

Question #2: What did your GAL do to help you?

- ❖ Supported my choices. Former foster youth had clear memories of the advocacy role their GAL volunteer played. They appreciated their GAL volunteer supporting their living arrangement decisions.

“Helped me stay in my foster home when my caseworker wanted to move me. I went to court and saw how hard “Mr. J.” and the lawyer argued. I was just starting my senior year and I was on the Varsity football team. I didn’t want to leave my family and friends. I got to stay.”

“Told the Judge what I wanted like not living with my uncle but on my own.”

“Helped decide who we should live with---My brother and I were allowed to move in with a former teacher. Otherwise (we) would have ended up in a group home or foster home with people I didn’t know.”

“Helped me get adopted.”

“Helped me find a good place to live when I turned 18.”

- ❖ Cared about me. Many former foster youth had fond recollections of the attention that they received from their GAL volunteer.

Academics: “teach me stuff I didn’t know like math and reading.”

Legal proceedings: “my GAL was there when I had to testify in court about the allegations in front of my parents.”

Family matters: “helped me to get visits with my brothers.”

Most of the time, however, the caring that the youths remembered most was of a very personal nature.

“To see where I’m at, to guide me through, to make sure I can make it through life and encourage me.”

“Comfort me when I needed comfort, talk to me, and make sure I was being a responsible adult.”

“My GAL never gave up on me and now I have a child, married, and I’m going to college.”

“She has helped me keep my head held high when things got out of hand and never let me give up.”

Question #3: What would you have liked your GAL to do that he or she did not do?

- ❖ I can't think of anything...Maybe stay in my life. Over half of the youth interviewed indicated that they could not think of anything additional that their GAL volunteer could have done. "Thanks for helping and understanding." A few of the respondents, however, expressed their wish that their GAL volunteer could have either stayed with them longer or at least stayed in touch.

"Stayed a little longer. Stopped when I was 19. Maybe if a GAL could stay on, the youth would have an advocate."

"(I) no longer see her and I miss her."

"Stay in my life instead of just disappearing."

"Stay in touch after I aged out. I really could have used his help then, too."

- ❖ Take me places. The inability to be transported by their GAL volunteer to the mall or out to eat is something a few of these respondents still regret.

"It would have been nice if my GAL could have transported me. If so I wouldn't have missed my Aunt's memorial service. I asked my GAL to take me that Sunday, but she said she would have liked to but she couldn't because she wasn't allowed to transport. It was the weekend and the group home ran on what they called a "skeleton crew" so I missed the memorial service... I just always knew that my GAL would have done things like that for me if she had been allowed to."

Question #4: If you were a GAL, what would you make sure to do?

- ❖ Be caring and concerned. The selflessness and compassion of the older youth appears to reflect their past and present experiences as well as their desire to support other foster children and youth. Their list of ideas for what a GAL volunteer needs to do to be effective is comprehensive.

"Be available to listen."

"Take what my kid said seriously."

"Go to court hearings and visit regularly."

"Make sure they had what they need."

“Get to know them as much as possible.”

“Check on how the child is doing in school, make sure the child understands the court system and follow up on things the case worker didn’t do.”

“Bring them small gifts so that they have something to look forward to.”

As one member of the group succinctly said: “If I were a GAL, I would try to be just like my GAL. I would make sure I go in with an open mind and not judge my kids.”

Another declared that: “I would know that it’s a kid’s life – not just a job.”

- ❖ Be a mentor. Although the idea of mentoring is inherent in the ideas expressed above, a few members of the group were specific about what they would do to mentor a child or youth with whom they were working.

One suggested that he would: “tutor them, be a counselor, and just have a shoulder to lean on.”

Another suggested she would: “check on life situation (sic) and make sure he is staying out of trouble... provide guidance.”

One ardent and determined member of this group summarized his potential GAL volunteer role with the following words: “I would make sure that the kid know (sic) I am there for him – help as much as I can (and tell him) never give up on your dreams. I’d make sure they accomplish everything they got on their mind and make sure they can make it through life.”



CONCLUSION

When listening to the voices of the children and youth surveyed during the “A Voice Heard” Initiative, it is clear, GAL volunteers and the children they represent have a strong, durable bond.....built on the following key elements:

1. Communication: Talking, Listening and Understanding
2. Personal Interest: Caring, Concern and Emotional Support
3. Advocacy: Judicial, Educational and Situational
4. Trust: Responsiveness, Honesty and Reliability

GAL volunteers are sometimes the only constant in a child’s life.

Young elementary school age children feel they are vulnerable. Perhaps afraid, or missing their relationships with family members, or lonely, or not really understanding what is happening to them, they want to make sure someone is watching out for them. In their minds, the GAL volunteer is a protector, friend, information provider, and safety-net. It is clear that for elementary aged children, their GAL volunteer is important for the guidance, the access to court, and the shoulder to lean on they provide. From the survey information, the GAL volunteer is providing the stability and consistency that is needed in the child’s life.

Pre-teens and teens seem more focused on having a personal relationship with their GAL volunteer. They have a better understanding of what is happening to them and seek support in navigating their personal feelings, their family relationships, and court procedures. Their GAL volunteer is a caring companion and a non-judgmental sounding board. Pre-teen children look to their GAL volunteer as someone who can help them think through their problems and cheer them up when they are sad. This age group values someone in their life who is concerned about their well-being and in whom they can confide. A GAL volunteer working with middle school-aged children is helping them transition between childhood and adulthood while helping them sort through the challenges of being in the dependency system.

Because the questions posed to the middle school and high school youth are identical, there is an opportunity to examine the differences and similarities of the responses of the two groups. Both groups place considerable emphasis on the one-to-one relationship they have with their GAL volunteer. For both groups, communication and conversation are central to the existence and strength of the relationship with their GAL volunteer.

The evolving maturity of the high school group, however, appears to be a factor shaping the youth - GAL volunteer relationship into a more adult “partnership.” To the teen, the GAL volunteer represents a source of information and help for accomplishing their goals and living an independent life. Although still concerned with their own personal development, the teens also appear to be (as might be expected) increasingly concerned with “fitting in” and “being normal.” They are looking to their GAL volunteer to help them learn those skills and acquire those experiences which will help them realize this ambition.

Former foster youth have been living on their own for a relatively short period of time, so they are able to clearly recall their experiences working with their GAL volunteer. A comparison of their responses with those of other ages reveals the same recognition of the rapport they had with their GAL volunteer. The difference between this group and the others, however, is memory of how their GAL volunteer enabled them to make their own decisions and helped them move toward self-sufficiency. Their regret that this relationship was not a continuing one reveals the additional support that the respondents would have appreciated. It is notable – and laudable – that these young men and women would like to share their experiences with other dependent youth and provide the support that they, themselves, had the opportunity to receive.

Through the “A Voice Heard” Initiative children’s voices have been heard. The conversations detailed above show the respect and appreciation foster youth and former foster youth have of their GAL volunteer. Their GAL volunteer is a friend, a mentor, a counselor, a teacher, an advocate, a supporter, and a cheerleader – all rolled into one. Such an important role can be daunting, even for those caring and dedicated enough to willingly assume the responsibilities associated with becoming a GAL volunteer.

The children’s voices, however, also tell of the success of GAL volunteers in being able to establish a caring and supportive relationship with the children and youth with whom they work, despite the numerous challenges and barriers. There are lessons to be learned from these voices as well as Program objective goals to be developed.

The “A Voice Heard” Initiative documents the Program’s achievements but also raises the bar for future growth. As an outcome of listening to the children’s voices, the Guardian ad Litem Program – our staff and volunteers - will continue to strengthen strategies and opportunities which make a difference for the abused, abandoned, and neglected children in Florida.

“Guardian ad Litem volunteers are a special group because they are committed to the relentless advocacy for the well-being and best interest of the children they serve,” Governor Rick Scott said. “I am thankful for each of the nearly 8,000 Florida GALs currently making a difference in the lives of children every day, and I welcome the new guardians being sworn in today.”

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