

Annual Report | 2017

MAKING THE IMPOSSIBLE
~~IMPOSSIBLE~~

Stories of
Advocacy



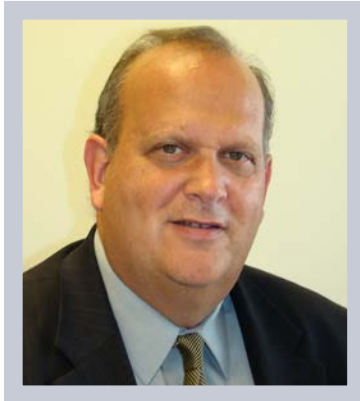
GAL

Guardian ad Litem
A POWERFUL VOICE FOR
FLORIDA'S CHILDREN

FLORIDA GUARDIAN AD LITEM

“Stories have to be told or they die, and when they die, we can’t remember who we are or why we’re here.”

- Sue Monk Kidd, *The Secret Life of Bees*



Stories remind me of my childhood. Stories before bed. Stories at the dinner table. Stories around the fire when my brothers and I camped in the back yard.

Sometimes the best way to understand an idea or a point of view is through storytelling. Whether it’s a fable that teaches the importance of being honest, or the stories from our parents teaching us right from wrong - stories make an impact on us.

When I think of the incredible work of the Florida Guardian ad Litem Program, my mind turns to hundreds of individual stories of advocacy. The small wins. The big wins. A child getting to play soccer, a sister and brother reunited with their parents, a foster youth admitted to the Naval Academy, or a large group of siblings finding their forever home, together at last. I also think of the story tellers – the Guardian ad Litem volunteers, the Guardian ad Litem staff, and pro-bono attorneys who give so generously to the mission of the Program.

Throughout this year’s Guardian ad Litem Annual Report, the story of the Florida Guardian ad Litem Program is told by the advocates who give voice to Florida’s abused, neglected and abandoned children in court. All of these stories are true reminders of the important work of the Guardian ad Litem Program – although names and some places have been changed.

These are the stories of the Florida Guardian ad Litem Program; they show who we are and why we are here.



Alan F. Abramowitz
Executive Director
Florida Guardian ad Litem Program

THE GAL PROGRAM

When someone suspects a child is being abused, abandoned, or neglected, they call the Florida Abuse Hotline (1-800-96ABUSE), and a protective investigator visits the child to determine if the child’s welfare is endangered. The Department of Children and Families (the Department) may offer services to the family if the child can remain at home in a healthy, safe environment where her welfare is protected. However, if the child cannot remain safely at home with services, the Department must remove the child, and she is placed in shelter care. When a child is sheltered, a court hearing is held within 24 hours and a dependency case begins. A guardian ad litem (GAL) volunteer is appointed at the shelter hearing to represent the best interests of the child, as required by Florida Statutes.

While the Department and the Guardian ad Litem Program (GAL Program) both work to protect the safety and welfare of abused, abandoned, and neglected children, the two entities serve different purposes. The Department is responsible for assessing risk and providing direct services to families, which is done through community based care agencies.

Under state and federal law, the Department is required to make reasonable efforts to reunify the family, and the Department must abide by many state and federal regulations that impact the funding the state receives for the child welfare system. The Department serves a number of individuals, including the child, the child’s parents, relatives, and foster parents.

The GAL Program advocates exclusively for the best interests of the children. Florida Statutes require a GAL be appointed at the earliest possible time in the dependency proceeding. The GAL Program often collaborates with the Department to achieve a particular outcome for a child. However, the GAL Program looks at the case through the eyes of an independent volunteer who knows the child well, and may disagree with the Department’s recommendations to the court.

This independent perspective provides an opportunity for judges to hear what is best for each child before making decisions that forever affect the child’s life.

The GAL collects comprehensive information about the child and family and attends staffings and hearings. They visit the child regularly in her home environment to understand her needs and wishes and explain the process in a way she can understand. Using this information, the Program makes recommendations to the judge as to the child’s best interests and reports the child’s wishes. The Program works to ensure child-centered decisions are made regarding placement, visitation, termination of parental rights, adoption, education, and the child’s well-being. Some examples of issues a GAL might work on include ensuring a child who has been removed from her home stays in the same school, advocating for increased visitation between children and their parents or siblings, and identifying age-specific services for children. The GAL monitors the child and all participants in the case to promote and prevent children from languishing in the foster care system.



GAL MISSION.

"I am for the Child."

GAL VISION.

The GAL Program will continue to be a powerful and effective voice advocating for the best interests of Florida's abused, abandoned and neglected children and be recognized and respected as a partnership of community advocates and professional staff. To the fullest extent possible, this vision will be realized through volunteers who will advocate as Guardians ad Litem for the children they serve.

GAL CORE VALUES.

We believe each child deserves an advocate, supported by the GAL Program, to give children a voice. The GAL Program is committed to the following Core Values:

- **Commitment to Children.**

The children for whom we advocate are our most important priority.

- **Communication Built on Trust.**

The GAL Program has a culture of open communication, active listening, teamwork, and regard for the views of others. This includes being honest and straightforward with the children we represent in keeping with their level of age and maturity.

- **Collective Empowerment.**

Each circuit has the authority and responsibility to make and implement the best decisions to meet the children's needs. This empowerment must be passed on to volunteers, staff and attorneys.

- **Collaboration.**

The GAL Program proactively seeks to develop relationships that promote the well-being of the whole child.

- **Courtesy.**

The GAL Program values all who engage in this challenging work and ensures they are treated with respect and dignity.



As a Volunteer Guardian ad Litem I get all types of different questions.

"Do you get paid?" I answer, "No, all Guardians ad Litem are actually volunteers."
"Oh... you do it because you need the volunteer hours for school?" Again my answer is no.
The last and more common question is, *"How can you do such a sad job?"*
To that I respond that I do not know what I would do if I could not do this amazing work.

Being a GAL is the most rewarding experience I've ever had; it is not a sad job, but a very important one. You get to be the voice of children that have lived most of their lives in silence; you get to advocate for their rights, and make sure they're fulfilled. I get paid in smiles, hugs, gratitude, and the peace of mind that a little boy or a teenage girl is now smiling in the safety of a home.

It is our responsibility as adults to create a safe world for our children. Guardians ad Litem are hope, strength, and safety for a young person - who sometimes does not have anybody else to provide this for them.

Be someone's hero today. Do your part in making this world a better one. Wake up every day knowing that somewhere there is child that will always be grateful for your existence.

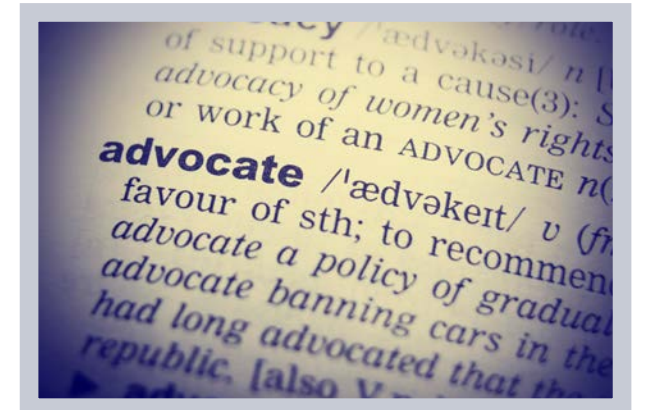
Guardians ad Litem do not get paid because their job is invaluable.

Alaiana Machado
GAL Volunteer (Miami Dade)

GUARDIAN AD LITEM VOLUNTEERS

Before the GAL Program existed, abused and neglected children went to court alone. Now there are more than 10,000 volunteers and 740 staff representing the needs of thousands of dependent children. In the last 35 years, more than 30,000 volunteers, have represented more than 250,000 children. The Florida GAL Program has the highest number of GAL volunteers nationwide! GAL volunteers ensure that during what is certainly the most difficult time in a child's life, that child has a consistent advocate who listens to them, makes sure the court hears their voice and advocates for their needs.

The GAL volunteer's perspective is unique because the GAL volunteer advocates for one child or a sibling group, and typically represents only one or two children, rather than managing a caseload. The child is not a case or a number. While case workers and placements may change, a GAL volunteer is a constant in the child's life. The GAL volunteer advocates from the perspective that every child should be treated as if he or she were the only child in the foster care system.



THE STORIES OF THE GUARDIAN AD LITEM PROGRAM

Being a child's voice as a GAL volunteer is much more than visits, court reports and telephone calls. The GAL Program is guided by the words - the child's best interest is our only interest. That mantra is as true in the courtroom as it is in the Legislature, or the many committees and organizations that staff and volunteers participate in every day. In addition to being a voice for children in court, GAL volunteers advocate for legislative changes that are in the child's best interest; for the rules and policies that govern how attorneys and judges handle cases to be in the child's best interest; and case law that supports the best interests of children.

Sometimes it is the little things GAL volunteers give to the children they serve – the little things that are so large in the eyes of a foster child. A single twenty-four-year-old took in her five nieces and nephews. The children range in age from an infant to seven years old. The oldest boy wanted to play football, but their aunt was unable to afford the necessary cleats. The GAL volunteer was able to buy him the cleats he needed. That gesture by his GAL volunteer led to better behavior and improved grades once the child started to play football.



Linda Zolper is making a difference in the lives of children who have been abused, abandoned, and neglected as a GAL volunteer and was recently named the Program's 2016 Audrey Lincourt Schiebler Volunteer of the Year.

Donna Rasmussen, Sixth Circuit GAL Director said, "It is difficult to highlight all of her accomplishments. . . to get a sense of Linda's heart for teens." Rasmussen recounted the story of a teen whose life was changed due to Linda's advocacy and commitment. The young man was in his senior year of high school when a court ordered his placement be changed, requiring him to move to a different school. Instead of allowing his education to be disrupted and his senior year ruined, Linda got up every morning to drive him to school, and advocated in court for transportation to be provided until the end of the year.

Linda Zolper
2016 Audrey Lincourt Schiebler
Vounteer of the Year

GAL LEGISLATIVE INITIATIVES

In addition to being a voice for children in court, the GAL Program advocates for legislative changes that are in the child's best interest. Since 2005, the GAL Program has worked with the Legislature and with other child welfare organizations, resulting in positive changes for Florida's dependent children. New and revised laws have made the lives of dependent children better in ways both big and small. As reflected below, the GAL Program is a fierce advocate on behalf of children before the Florida Legislature.

Child's Best Hope Act - Adoption Intervention

Before the Governor signed the Child's Best Hope Act in 2016, parents who had murdered a spouse, committed egregious acts against their children, or who wanted to punish a foster parent could choose who their child should be placed with — without requiring the court to consider what is in child's best interests. Sen. Nancy Detert, and Rep. Janet Adkins sponsored the Child's Best Hope Act in order to change this unintended consequence of the law as it was written and allow judges to consider the child's best interests when making these important adoption placement decisions.

Since the law passed, the GAL Program has used the Child's Best Hope Act to serve the best interests of children.

After a four-year old boy's mother was murdered by his father, the boy was sheltered by the Department and placed with his maternal aunt. While the father was in jail awaiting trial, he chose the child's paternal grandmother to adopt the child - effectively eliminating the maternal family from the child's life. Because of the wording of Florida's adoption statute, the court could only determine

if the paternal grandmother was a fit and proper placement for the boy. The court could not consider what was best for the boy (including possibly staying with his maternal aunt). The Child's Best Hope Act changed all that.

A Child's Life Bettered by the Child's Best Hope Act

The GAL Program was appointed to represent a 5-year-old who was in the system because the child was a victim of human trafficking. The family had been working toward reunification for several years, until the horrifying discovery that the girl's mother was complicit in the sexual abuse and trafficking of her child. The Department asked the court for an expedited Termination of Parental Rights.

The child had been living with a family that wanted to adopt her for 18 months and was making great strides in her therapy and toward a normal life. The mother and the child's biological father (who was not involved in her life) then signed consents for the child to be adopted by the child's maternal aunt, who had not seen the child in years. Professionals involved with the case worried that the maternal aunt would allow ongoing contact between the mother and the child, and that the child would live in a constant state of anxiety triggered by reminders of past events.

Using the old statute, the judge granted the motion for change of placement to the maternal aunt. But because of the Child's Best Hope Act, the GAL Program was able to secure an emergency rehearing. The judge considered all the required factors - including the child's best interest - and the motion for placement with the aunt was denied. Instead of being torn from a safe, loving family at the direction of her abusers, the child was able to stay with the people she knows as "mommy and daddy."



Champion of Service Award

The Champion of Service Award is Florida's only statewide volunteer recognition. The award recognizes a volunteer who demonstrates excellence in volunteerism and community service. This year the prestigious award went to two GAL volunteers Gale Spires and Dot Binger.

Gale has been with the GAL Program for three years and has advocated for 20 abused and neglected children of all ages and is currently representing seven children.

Dot Binger has served as a GAL volunteer in the Second Circuit for over 27 years and has been the voice for more than 60 children of all ages. She works more than 20 hours a week for the GAL Program - providing a voice for children involved in Florida's foster care system.



GUARDIANS AD LITEM CAN TRANSPORT THE CHILDREN THEY SERVE

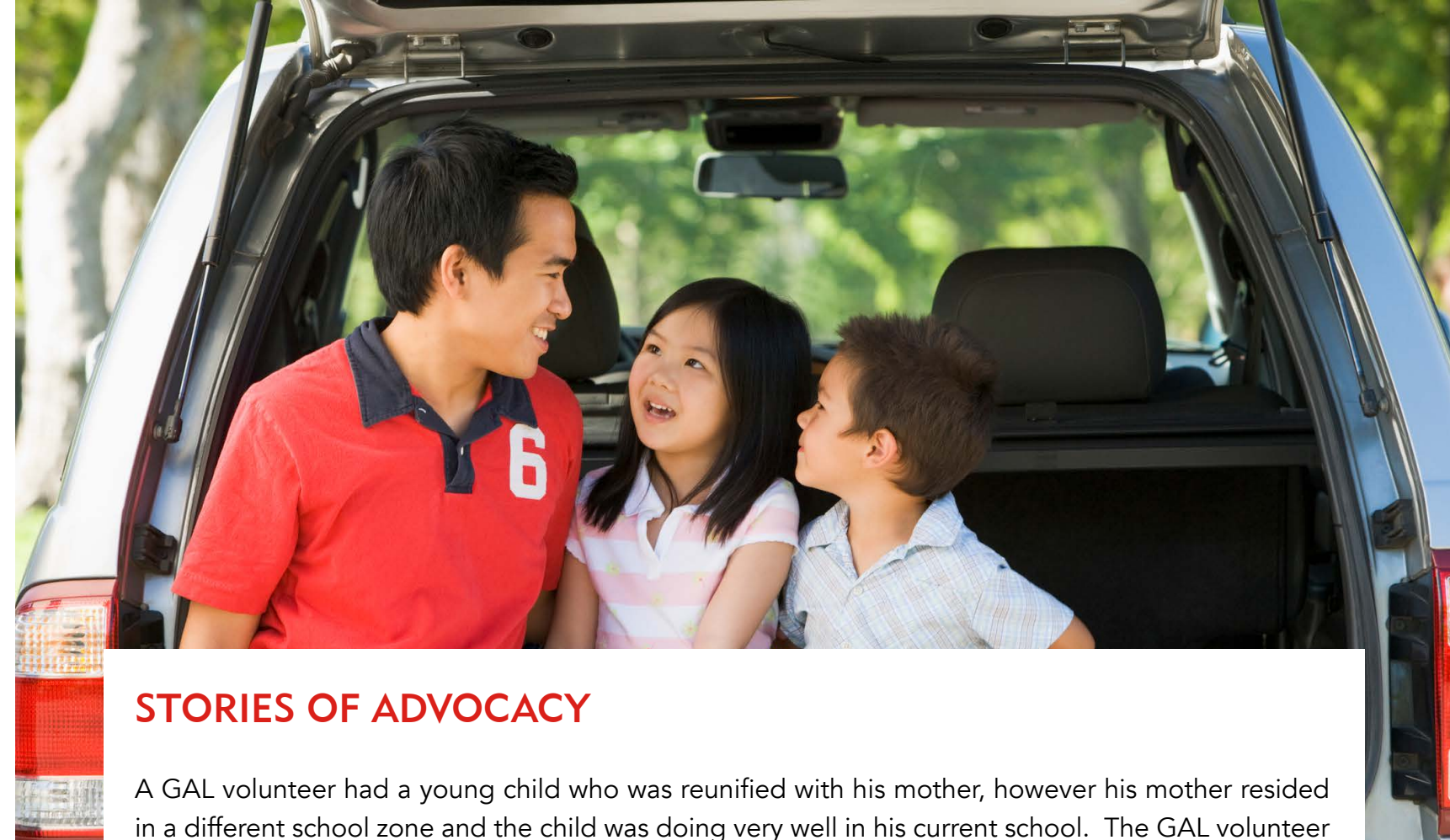
During the 2012 Florida Legislative Session, statutory language was passed which gives Guardians ad Litem the authority to transport the children they serve. Section 39.8296(2)(b)(7), Florida Statutes, states that “In an effort to promote normalcy and establish trust between a court appointed volunteer guardian ad litem and a child alleged to be abused, abandoned, or neglected under this chapter, a guardian ad litem may transport a child. However, a guardian ad litem volunteer may not be required or directed by the program or a court to transport a child.”

The purpose of allowing GAL volunteers to transport children is to promote social, extracurricular and enrichment activities for children and to foster communication and relationships which in turn enhance child safety by facilitating trust between the GAL volunteer and child. Participation is on a voluntary basis.

Currently, more than a third of Florida’s 10,000 GAL volunteers are authorized to transport the children they serve. GAL volunteers who are approved to transport have many special stories to relate about the positive difference this option has made in the life of “their kids.”

A survey was conducted to gauge the success of the GAL transportation program. Comments from the children as well as GAL volunteers confirm that GAL volunteers being able to transport children has had many very positive outcomes, such as:

- an improved relationship between children and their GAL volunteers;
- greatly expanded normalcy experiences for children living in foster or group homes;
- more effective advocacy for dependent children based on the GAL volunteers’ increased knowledge of the children’s needs and desires; and
- the increased likelihood that children leaving the dependency system will be better prepared for a successful and fulfilling future.



STORIES OF ADVOCACY

A GAL volunteer had a young child who was reunified with his mother, however his mother resided in a different school zone and the child was doing very well in his current school. The GAL volunteer felt it was in the child’s best interest to remain in his school. The GAL volunteer assisted the mother in arranging with the school board transportation to and from school. Transportation for the child could not begin for a month and the mother did not have reliable transportation. The GAL volunteer picked up the child every morning and drove him to school and was there in the afternoon to pick the child up and take him home. If the volunteer had not transported the child, then he would have had to change schools in the middle of the semester. School stability is critical to children whose lives are so uprooted by their involvement in the child welfare system.

Playing football is the dream of many teenage boys – and that includes boys that are in foster care. A foster child who is a good student, loves football, and is the quarterback for his high-school team had the opportunity to attend a football camp. His GAL volunteer sprang into action. Not only did the GAL volunteer pay for the camp, but he also drove the child to the camp which is over 600 miles one way. Then he picked him up from the camp a week later to return home. Yet another 600 miles.

While at the camp the teenager was nominated as Most Valuable Player for the whole camp. Since the beginning of the school year, the teenager has been his team’s starting quarterback and his high school team has made it to the regional championship games. This was possible because the GAL volunteer was able and willing to drive the child to football camp.



It was not long after becoming a GAL volunteer that I realized my “kids” had not been able to experience a lot of the things my own and other children were able to experience growing up. I first realized this when Halloween was close and a child I represent had never been to a pumpkin patch. I’m thinking, “every child needs to go to a pumpkin patch to pick out their own pumpkin!” So I called my supervisor and she said I needed a transport certificate so that I am able to drive the child places. We made that happen as soon as possible. It brings tears to my eyes remembering... watching the child’s face as he ran from one pumpkin to another, dragging his wagon behind. He, of course wanted one of the biggest pumpkins and asked me if I wanted him to pick one out for me too. He took such pride showing me how strong he was, lifting them into the wagon and dragging that wagon back to where we paid for them. Back to the house we went for the carving and apple cider.

What I have found by being able to transport children is that when I get them away from their home and or school environment, they often open up more. I’m able to observe them in a very different way than their “norm” environment. I am very grateful for the opportunity to spend this type of time with my GAL kids.

Marla Montgomery
Guardian ad Litem Volunteer

LET KIDS BE KIDS - NORMALCY FOR FOSTER CHILDREN

On July 1, 2013, Florida legislation fondly known as the “Let Kids Be Kids” Bill became effective. This law gives foster parents and identified caregivers in group homes the legal authority to allow children and youth in their care to participate in normal, age-appropriate activities using the “reasonable and prudent parent” standard of decision-making, without fear of civil liability. The bill was supported by the belief that children in foster care deserve to be treated like any other child, and all children should be able to participate in the normal activities of childhood. The law removes bureaucracy from the lives of foster children and their caregivers. GAL Program staff and GAL volunteers tell the stories of normalcy – of letting Kids Be Kids.

Sometimes it is the GAL volunteer that makes sure a child is in the best place they can be for success. A teenager in foster care was facing a change in schools because of her new placement. She was very unhappy with the prospect of attending a new high school and asked her GAL volunteer to help her return to her original high school. The teenager’s group home and the Department had many concerns but the GAL volunteer was strong in advocating for the teenager to return to her original school. The GAL volunteer did everything he could to address the concerns of those involved with the decision to let her go back to her original school. The GAL volunteer inspected walking routes, bus locations and times, reviewed safety concerns and cell phone usage, met with school personnel, provided a tablet so she could



To assess the impact of the *Let Kids Be Kids* law, foster parents and GAL volunteers as well as Regional Directors of the Department responded to a brief survey. Findings indicated that the “Let Kids Be Kids” law:

- substantially improved the lives of the children and youth as a result of their increased involvement in a wider variety of age-appropriate experiences; and
- provided foster parents with the decision-making authority to create a normal home life for children in their care.



do homework on the bus, and gave the teenager a list of options should she encounter an issue with transportation – including calling her GAL volunteer.

The teenager transferred back to her original school in November and sent her GAL volunteer the following text message, “I got chosen to represent Florida and [my] high school in Washington DC, at the Washington Journalism and Media Conference. How cool is that!?”

THE REGIS LITTLE ACT TO PROTECT CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS -GUARDIANSHIP

The Regis Little Act to Protect Children with Special Needs provides protections for young adults in foster care with disabilities as they transition into adulthood. The law ensures these vulnerable young adults will have a guardian in place when they turn 18.

Young adults who need a guardian but leave the foster care system without a guardian are subject to a variety of safety issues. A young adult, who is presumed to have the ability to make decisions for themselves, may leave the safety of their placement. Unless a court appoints a guardian, the young adult can simply walk away from their housing, losing the ability to continue crucial services without again going through an arduous process and long delay on a wait-list to regain those services. Or perhaps a parent (whose abuse was so serious the courts had to remove the child from that parent’s care) may pick up the young adult at their placement – again putting them at risk of exploitation or neglect. Sadly, a young adult with a mental health diagnoses or disability can easily be taken advantage of by unscrupulous people. Guardians also help young adults make crucial life decisions. For example, an 18-year-old who has a disability may find it impossible

to make decisions about his or her education. Guardians help these young adults make the decisions that may affect them for a lifetime.

Regis Little, was a child in need of guidance, in need of a mentor, of someone to watch over him – a guardian. Through no fault of his own, he was a child of Florida’s foster care system. The cards were stacked against him from the start - bipolar, hyperactive, and aggressive and an IQ of 65. His half-sister said he hated being alone and was afraid of the dark.

Regis lived in nine different placements from 2000 to 2008, when he turned 18 and aged out of the system. He lived in a few group homes, but most were locked mental-health facilities where he underwent counseling. Regis was taking at least five psychotropic medications at various times. In the end, he died alone in a parking lot after being stabbed over a stolen beer.

Regis Little’s story is a disturbing example of the need for a guardian to be in place for young adults in foster care turning 18 who lack the ability to make decisions for themselves. The Regis Little Act is special not only because of the young man it is named after, but also for the young adults the law protects. The Regis Little Act provides a method for identifying guardians for 17-year-old dependent children so that those who need a guardian will have one in place before they turn 18 and leave the foster care system.



Sarah has been in the system for eleven years and will soon turn 18 years old. Removed from her family due to abuse and neglect, Sarah suffers from a major mental health diagnosis along with maladaptive behavioral issues. Her IQ places her at a level between Pre-K and Kindergarten. The issues generated by her mental illness and behaviors include not adapting well to new people in her life. Her GAL volunteer reached out to The Guardianship Group, an agency that assured the GAL Program they will stay with Sarah with minimal staffing interruptions.

The guardianship transition is not an easy one. There are many moving parts, and they all need to be in place before the application is submitted. GAL Child’s Best Interest Attorneys led the process and put together a complicated application in a very short period of time and they are now well on their way to ensuring Sarah has a guardian before she turns eighteen.

Although oversimplified here, Sarah’s journey has been a decade of ongoing struggle. Betrayed by both her parents and her environment, Sarah found refuge in her amazing GAL volunteer, and GAL Program who cared for her like family.



FLORIDA KEYS TO INDEPENDENCE ACT - DRIVER'S LICENSE PROGRAM FOR FOSTER CHILDREN

The Florida Keys to Independence Act was signed into law in 2014. It is targeted at youth in licensed foster care between the ages of 15 to 21.

During the 2014 Session, Florida Legislators approved a three-year pilot program to provide youth in licensed out-of-home care with the opportunity to obtain their driver's license. Funded by the Department and administered by Community-Based Care of Central Florida Inc., the Keys to Independence Program has been in effect since 2015. It provides eligible youth the opportunity to obtain: Learners License, Driver's License, Testing fees, 4-hour Traffic Law and Substance Abuse Course, Driver's Education Course, and Insurance.

The pilot project reimburses youth and caregivers for the costs associated with driver's education, driver's licenses and other costs related to getting a driver's license as well as motor vehicle insurance.

Senator Aaron Bean is sponsoring legislation this year to make the program for driver's licenses for foster children a permanent program.

Having a driver's license is critical to ensuring foster children can live independently and gain employment when they age out of the foster care system. Only nine percent of Florida's foster children have a learner's permit and only three percent have a driver's license.

The Keys to Independence Program has licensed almost half of the 1,916 children eligible for participation in the program. Since the passage of the Keys to Independence bill, the program has licensed a total of 1,139 foster youth. You can learn more about the Keys to Independence Program by visiting www.keystoindependence.org.

The GAL Program worked hard to ensure a sixteen-year-old girl in foster care received her driver permit. The GAL Program assisted her in applying for assistance through the Keys to Independence Program and she completed the online drug and alcohol required course. The group home where she was placed was unable to assist with the required practice driving hours and she did not want to practice with the GAL volunteer's stick shift car. The GAL Program worked with the Keys to Independence Program to provide private lessons from a local driving school. The teenager needed more hours than the Keys to Independence Program could cover, so the local driving school worked with the GAL Program to provide additional hours at a reduced cost.

Matthew came into care in September of 2013, and has watched his care change and expand as statutes changed.

It is difficult to make Matthew's story sound exceptional, since to most folks, his life was completely normal. But those who know the system know how extraordinary his care was. Matthew was placed into a safe, loving home with caregivers who ultimately adopted him. He was older, so he was in high school for the duration of his care. He was able to attend school dances with no concerns, thanks to the normalcy statute.

Thanks to the Keys to Independence statute, he obtained his driver's license while in care. Thanks to the transportation statute, his GAL volunteer was able to take him to visit colleges, with an extensive visit to Florida State University. His caregivers had six other foster children in the house, and a college visit could not have occurred without transportation by the GAL volunteer and the normalcy statute which allowed him to travel overnight with no concerns.



ATTORNEYS FOR CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

Legislation was passed in 2014 enacting Florida Statute § 39.01305, which requires appointment of attorneys to dependent children with certain special needs – children in or being considered for a skilled nursing facility, children prescribed psychotropic medications, children with a developmental disability, children placed or considered for placement in a residential treatment center, or children who are victims of human trafficking. As with other court appointments, these appointments are pursuant to an attorney registry maintained by the Justice Administrative Commission (JAC). These registry attorneys offer their expertise to these children throughout Florida.

In addition to paid counsel, the GAL Program is appreciative of the many pro bono attorneys who share their legal expertise and represent children with special needs. Many organizations have stepped up without compensation to advocate for children:

- North Florida Legal Services (NFLS)
- Florida State University Public Interest Law Center
- Dade Legal Aid's Put Something Back Program
- Cuban American Bar Association (partially funded by the Florida Bar Foundation)
- Crossroads for Kids
- The Florida Equal Justice Center
- Orange County Legal Aid; and
- Legal Aid Society of Palm Beach County – Juvenile Advocacy Project.

Law firms, such as Akerman, LLP, consistently provide legal support in the local circuits in areas such as immigration, education, administrative or other specialized areas of the law.

The GAL Program offers support for pro bono and registry attorneys taking these very important cases, including:

- The GAL Disabilities Training Conference where each year hundreds of attorneys and other child welfare professionals learn more about representing children with special needs;
- The GAL Statewide website which offers legal training with CLE credit videos, training phone calls and materials;
- The GAL Dependency Practice Manual (2016); and
- Legal Briefs Newsletter (bi-monthly) which offers case summaries and other relevant information.

While pro bono attorneys are integral in supporting representation of children with special needs, registry attorneys provide representation when a pro bono attorney is not available.

Uniformly, registry attorneys communicated that they truly enjoy the work and find it the most meaningful work they do. From fighting for a child to have their psychotropic medications reduced and ultimately discontinued, to assisting a child with Agency for Persons with Disabilities services literally the day before the child turned 18, these attorneys are making a true difference in the lives of the children they represent.

In one case a registry attorney made sure a child who had been involuntarily committed nine times for psychiatric evaluations under Florida's Baker Act received the care he needed at an in-patient mental health facility for treatment.

A registry attorney represented a child for many years, appealing the case to the Third District Court of Appeal where the attorney prevailed on behalf of the child. In this case, the trial court sought to place the child in residential treatment despite the recommendations of the three residential treatment assessors that the child's needs did not warrant residential placement. Without the advocacy of the attorney, the child would have surely languished in a residential treatment placement. Instead, the child received appropriate services and is now thriving in the community.

Another attorney advocated for a child who was intellectually gifted but because of the child's transgender issues was labeled as delayed and struggled academically. Once the child was in counseling to address the complicated sexual identity issues, the child began to blossom academically.

The Florida Guardian ad Litem Program announced 21 attorneys were named as winners of the Program's award for Excellence in Advocacy for special needs children who have been abused or neglected. Alan Abramowitz, Executive Director, made the announcement noting that these attorneys had distinguished themselves in the courtroom as champions for children.

2016 GAL PROGRAM'S EXCELLENCE IN ADVOCACY AWARD WINNERS

Robert Latham Eleventh Circuit and Statewide Winner
Susan Winterberger First Circuit
Stephanie Johnson Second Circuit
Heidi Kempf Third Circuit
Connie Byrd Fourth Circuit
Brenda Smith Fifth Circuit
Bowdre McAllister Sixth Circuit
Carol Kelley Seventh Circuit
Nancy Wright Eighth Circuit
Barbara Glass Ninth Circuit
Deborah Wells Tenth Circuit
C. Michael Kelly Twelfth Circuit
Scott Horvat Thirteenth Circuit
Lawrence Kranert, Jr. Fourteenth Circuit
Penny Martin Fifteenth Circuit
Richard F. Joyce Sixteenth Circuit
Linda Singer Seventeenth Circuit
Pamela Bress Eighteenth Circuit
Crystal Marsh Nineteenth Circuit
Kathy Bruno Twentieth Circuit
Leonard Helfand Appeals

Registry attorneys often help children achieve permanency in unique ways. Registry attorneys regularly advocate to maintain placements with creative funding strategies rather than simply moving a child quickly, which is the typical reaction when there is a barrier regarding funding. Registry attorneys are encouraging courts to look at alternatives to Termination of Parental Rights in cases where a child might benefit from a continued relationship with their parents even if their disability requires a more intensive placement.

PRO BONO ATTORNEYS

Attorneys who want to use their legal expertise to give a voice to Florida's most vulnerable children, find a meaningful pro bono experience with the GAL Program. Since 2008, between 250 and 350 attorneys have volunteered their time with the GAL Program each year.

Pro Bono attorneys give a child a voice by:

- representing children with certain special needs;
- becoming a GAL volunteer; or
- representing a child as an Attorney ad Litem in a traditional attorney-client relationship.

Pro bono attorneys also use their legal expertise to help children regarding issues such as immigration, special education, guardianship, and probate.

TRAINING AND RESOURCES

Through various resources and platforms, the GAL Program is able to train and support GAL volunteers, staff, and pro bono attorneys. The GAL Program's successful stories of advocacy could not happen without this sharing of best practices. The GAL Program has a variety of resources and training available to ensure GAL volunteers and staff are effectively able to represent the children the GAL Program serves.

Monthly Conference Calls

The GAL Program's monthly conference calls for Child's Best Interest Attorneys are a cost-effective method to ensure staff is aware of changes in the law, best practices, and current issues facing youth. Continuing Legal Education credits are available for attorneys which enable them to maintain good standing with The Florida Bar at no cost to the attorney. All trainings are recorded and the audio files are placed on the GAL Program's website, which can be accessed by the public.

Website

The statewide website (www.GuardianadLitem.org) continues to develop as a useful resource for Child's Best Interest attorneys, GAL volunteers, and pro bono attorneys. Through the website, the GAL Program shares best practices, provides training and information, and recruits and supports



volunteers. The site also contains up-to-date case summaries, legislative updates, and links to statutory and administrative materials. The website includes many hours of video and conference call training – many available for CLE credit. Every month the GAL website receives over 10,000 visitors.

Optima

The GAL Program recently implemented the use of Optima - a web based GAL Case Management System. The system helps to ensure that everyone on the GAL team has the most up to date information to most effectively advocate for the child's best interests.

Newsletter

The GAL Program's Legal Briefs Newsletter provides case summaries and articles reinforcing general areas of practice as well as instruction on complex legal issues. The newsletter is available bi-monthly to volunteers, judges, attorneys, and others who have an interest in Florida dependency law and can be accessed through the website or can be delivered via email.

Dependency Practice Manual

Statewide experts contributed to the Florida GAL Dependency Practice Manual. Following the "path of a dependency case" this manual provides information, checklists and other resources needed in representing dependent children. The manual is available on the GAL website.

Disabilities Training Conference

This year's Florida Guardian ad Litem Disabilities Training Conference: *A Voice Heard: More Than 10,000 Strong* provided two days of networking, sharing best practices, and learning - challenging old ideas and creating new pathways to better advocacy for dependent children with disabilities. Over 450 attorneys,

judges and child welfare professionals attended the Third Florida Guardian ad Litem Program Disabilities Training Conference. The keynote speakers were inspiring, thought provoking, and offered tools to use in helping the children we work with every day. The workshops were wide ranging with presenters sharing their expertise in areas such as guardianships, psychotropic medications, master trusts and educational advocacy.

Every workshop and keynote speaker was recorded and is available along with workshop materials at www.GuardianadLitem.org. These recordings are also available for CLE credit for Florida attorneys – at no cost.

In Person Training and Conferences

Throughout the year the GAL Program has conducted in person training for new attorneys (two-day trainings), trial skills training (hands-on workshops that include direct and cross examination, evidence and objections) and Termination of Parental Rights training. Although these trainings are intended for Child's Best Interest Attorneys, staff have attended the trainings as well.

Child's Best Interest Attorneys have presented at major conferences throughout the year including the Department of Children and Families Child Protection Summit, National Court Appointed Special Advocates conference, and the GAL Disabilities Training Conference. They have also contributed to GAL volunteer training across the state.

Committees

Statewide Office attorneys on the National CASA Legal and Advocacy Committee consult on issues including government relations, legal issues to enhance internal functioning and public policy. GAL Child's Best Interest Attorneys participated in the proposed rule change governing claims of Ineffective Assistance of Counsel. The GAL Program filed a comment to the proposed rule change regarding Ineffective Assistance of Counsel to ensure the voices of Florida's dependent children were considered with any possible changes in Rules of Juvenile Procedure.

Appellate Advocacy

Appellate decisions can change the way the law is interpreted for thousands of children in the dependency system. The GAL Appellate team currently advocates for over 400 children on the appellate level. Recently, GAL Appellate Attorneys participated in an important Florida Supreme Court Case - *S.M. v. Florida Department of Children and Families* 202 50.30 769 (Fla. 2016), which held:

- The existence of an emotional bond between the parent and the child is not a reason to deny Termination of Parental Rights if the parent is unwilling or unable to safely assume parental responsibilities.
- Least Restrictive Means is part of a constitutional due process analysis; emotional bond is considered under the statutory manifest best interest analysis.

- If reunification is not possible, adoption is the next statutorily required permanency goal.

The GAL Program appealed an important case which resulted in the court holding that siblings were dependent who were "similarly situated" to the abused child because they were identically situated based on age, vulnerability, and proximity. "We found that although K.D.'s sibling did not suffer any abuse, "he was identically situated to his injured twin and equally susceptible to the same unexplained abuse." *N.H.*, 192 So. 3d at 595 (citing *K.D.*, 88 So. 3d at 986)." *In re J.H.*, 2016 WL 6777133 (Fla. 2d DCA).

FLORIDA GUARDIAN AD LITEM FOUNDATION

In 2007, the Florida Legislature authorized the Program to establish a Direct Support Organization (DSO).



This organization, known as the Florida Guardian ad Litem (Foundation), works to strengthen the network of non-profit organizations throughout the state and to raise private funds for statewide program needs. Today, the Foundation is part of a unique collaboration with the Florida GAL Program, serving as its DSO, with the goal of ensuring that a GAL volunteer represents every abused, abandoned or neglected child in the State of Florida.

This year the Foundation held regional training workshops for GAL volunteers. Judges, staff and other child welfare professionals from across the state shared their expertise with dedicated GAL volunteers.



Florida Guardian ad Litem Program Child Advocate Manager, Michael Harris Selected as a 2016 Angels in Adoption Honoree

Michael Harris of the First Judicial Circuit was recognized as a 2016 Angels in Adoption honoree for the First Congressional District of Florida. Michael was nominated by Congressman Jeff Miller for his hard work and dedication to the children he serves. Michael was able to accept the award at a Congressional luncheon hosted by the Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute in Washington D.C.

This year I had the opportunity to work my first volunteer case to conclusion. I am thankful that I took that opportunity. I am thankful for the resilience of the human spirit shown by the children I advocated for and the hard work and determination of their mother. I am thankful for the perspective I have gained on the volunteer experience. I have learned first-hand how frustrating the “system” can be and it makes me so much more thankful for our staff and volunteers who keep doing their best no matter what.

Most of all, I am thankful for all of you! Each and every one of you, whether you just started working with the GAL Program or have been a Guardian ad Litem for 20 years, made a decision to use your life to lift up someone else’s!

This year I have witnessed a mother who after her rights were terminated, turned her life around and with the help of some very determined GALs adopted her own child. I have seen a GAL return to active duty while still fighting stage 4 breast cancer! I have heard of countless small acts of kindness from helping a young man purchase his first suit so he could go to the homecoming dance to teaching a child how to read a menu at a restaurant or even just helping a 17-year-old believe that they could go to college if they want to. For all of these things I am profoundly thankful!

Sincerely,

Jennifer Manis
*Administrative Assistant
State of Florida Guardian ad Litem Program*



PUBLIC PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS

Government alone cannot meet the needs of Florida’s abused, abandoned, and neglected children. Throughout Florida there are non-profit organizations that support the local GAL Programs and help address other needs of children, providing financial assistance to child victims for a variety of their needs, such as medical, dental and mental-health services, medication, food, clothing, furniture, school supplies, tutoring, day care, after-school care, eyeglasses, summer camp and more. These public/private partnerships provide a vital support to the GAL Program, enabling it to represent more children, while leveraging state support with donations from the private sector.

Akerman LLP

Over the past three years the GAL Program and the Statewide GAL Foundation has partnered with Akerman LLP- a top 100 U.S law firm serving clients across the United States. This partnership was made possible through the National CASA Association. Over the past year Akerman LLP has given more than \$69,000 in support of Florida GAL Programs. They have more than doubled the amount that was raised last year. Over all, they are donating \$1 million dollars to all GAL and National CASA organizations across the country over the next three years. Additionally, their lawyers continue to provide pro-bono hours of legal advocacy for the GAL Program.



Sunshine Health

Sunshine Health provides children in Florida’s child welfare system with unique health care coverage that is responsive to their needs and the needs of their caregivers. Empowering those who impact the health and wellness of these children, the Sunshine Health Child Welfare Specialty Plan builds a care coordination network around every child with staff dedicated to helping each child’s caregiver navigate the complicated worlds of health care and child welfare. This year Sunshine Health donated \$12,500 to the GAL Foundation in support of Volunteer Regional Conferences.



Women’s Council of Realtors

The Women’s Council of Realtors is a network of successful realtors, advancing women as professionals and leaders in the business, the industry and the community that they serve. The Women’s Council of Realtors Florida State Chapter has 34 Chapters statewide. Their Chapters continue to be involved with local GAL Programs encouraging members to become certified GAL volunteers. This year the Women’s Council of Realtors donated over \$3,000 dollars to benefit the children of their local chapters.





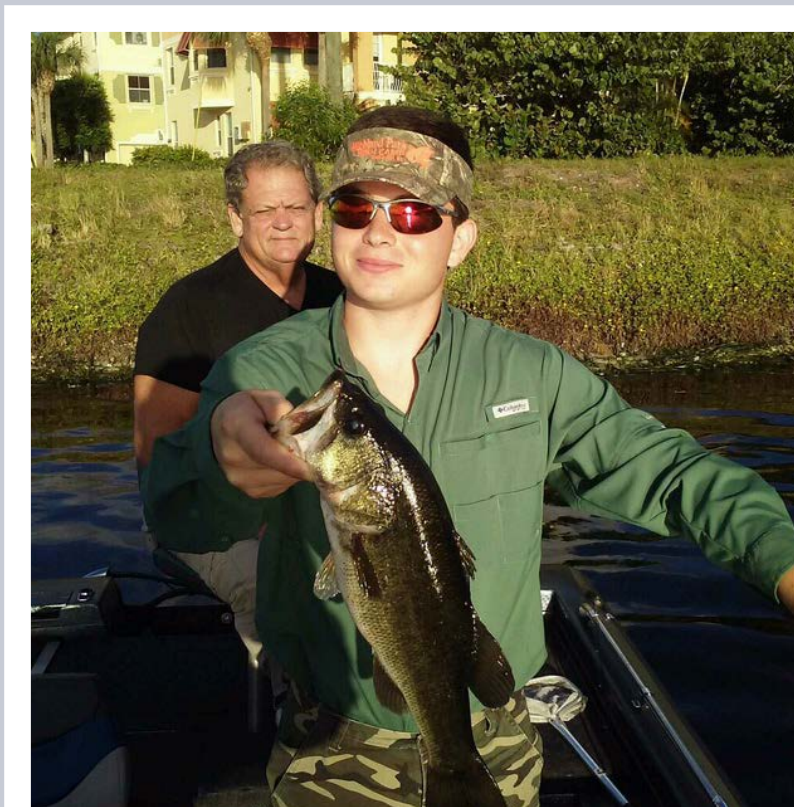
GFWC Florida Juniors

Founded in 1890, the General Federation of Women's Clubs, an international women's organization, has been a unifying force, bringing together local women's clubs from around the country and throughout the world that are dedicated to community improvement by enhancing the lives of others through volunteer service. This year the Director of Junior Clubs, Kelly Holmes, has selected the Guardian ad Litem Program as her project. They have coordinated fundraisers to benefit local GAL Programs, donated gift cards for the aging out youth, provided gas cards for GAL volunteers, members have facilitated GAL presentations at their local clubs and many have signed-on to become GAL Volunteers.

The GAL Program and the GAL Foundation are looking forward to these continued partnerships.

2017 Hanging of the Hands

The GAL Program is a proud partner of the 2017 Hanging of the Hands activity during Children's Week. Tens of thousands of brightly colored children's hand artwork is collected from child care centers and schools across the state and put on display in the State Capitol Rotunda for the entire week as a reminder to legislators, policy makers and advocates that we must take care of Florida's children.



Harlan Newton, a tremendous and very giving GAL volunteer, was awarded permanent guardianship of Anthony, a seventeen-year-old foster teen. Harlan writes:

"I am the caregiver and legal guardian for Anthony – a seventeen-year-old foster child. Anthony was placed with me in permanent guardianship in August of 2015 and now I am his legal guardian.

I was assigned as a Courtesy GAL for Anthony when he was fifteen years old and advocated for him and provided him normalcy activities once a week. I would also transport

him to his court hearings and advocate for him in court then return him back to his group home at the end of the day.

Anthony was placed in a group home of fifteen other peers that were much older and some peers about to age out. I tried to get a change of placement to a traditional foster home but was denied. I attended all of his staffings, independent living staffings, all of his psychotropic medication appointments. I advocated for Anthony to gradually stop his four psychotropic medications, which eventually occurred. I would visit him weekly and take him out fishing for the day, or to the movies, mall and dinner then return him to his group home.

In March of 2015 I was granted overnight weekend visits with Anthony. We continued with our weekend visits at my home and he was also able to spend his spring break with me. In June 2015, at the permanency hearing I advocated and asked the court for Anthony to be placed with me in a non-relative permanent guardianship placement. Thankfully the court agreed and I was able to be a permanent place for Anthony to call home."



The Statewide Guardian ad Litem Program Received a \$250,000 Grant from the National CASA Association

The purpose of the 2016 National CASA State Growth grant is to “support statewide initiatives to significantly increase the number of abused and neglected children served by CASA/GAL volunteers” and “support the National CASA Association’s national vision to serve every abused and neglected child.”

In 2011, the National CASA Association launched the “I am for the Child” campaign with print, web and social media. Through materials and support from National CASA, states across the nation supported and promoted the “I am for the Child” campaign in their home states. Florida, via its statewide program and its twenty local programs, also embraced the campaign which resulted in substantial volunteer growth. That growth has continued over the last five years. In fact, the (GAL) Program has over 10,000 volunteers giving a voice to Florida’s abused and neglected children.

With the National CASA Association State Growth grant, the Florida GAL Program will relaunch the “I am for the Child” campaign – statewide; in each of its twenty local programs; in every community; and in every city.”

“I am for the Child” – a promise GAL volunteers make every day to Florida’s abused and neglected children. The GAL Program’s goal and mission works hand-in-hand with the National CASA Association – every abused and neglected child served. The “I am for the Child” campaign will successfully recruit even more GAL volunteers as the GAL Program continues to embrace a volunteer-driven model of representation.

VOLUNTEER CHILD ADVOCATES CHANGE LIVES

“Being in foster care is living in a constant state of flux. Homes, schools, families...everything is always changing, often suddenly and without warning. The only constant was my GAL volunteer. Without her I would have been lost in the system.” **MELISSA, FORMER FOSTER YOUTH**

THE PROBLEM: OVERWHELMED SYSTEMS



There are **33,000** children in foster care and family court systems in Florida alone.

THE SOLUTION: GUARDIAN AD LITEM VOLUNTEERS

Volunteer guardians ad litem, trained volunteers who help abused and neglected children find safe, permanent homes.



THE RESULTS: BRIGHTER FUTURES



FLORIDA GAL PROGRAM VISION: SERVING EVERY CHILD



“The Florida Guardian ad Litem Program stands as a shining example of what heart-felt, tireless advocacy on behalf of the most vulnerable among us can accomplish. Children who have been abused, abandoned and neglected deserve to have an advocate who understands their needs and can help them find a safe and permanent home.” **JUDGE KELLY J. MCKIBBEN, EIGHTEENTH JUDICIAL CIRCUIT COURT**

STORIES OF ADVOCACY TELL THE STORY OF THE FLORIDA GUARDIAN AD LITEM PROGRAM

The GAL Program is a complex system of attorneys, volunteers, staff, training, support, technology and state agencies – with the simplest of missions. The best interest of the child is our only interest. Even more simply put – I am for the Child.

Every day the GAL staff and over 10,000 GAL volunteers go into court, attend a meeting, place a phone call, present their case at a staffing meeting, observe a visit between parent and child, or watch a child find their forever family. It is often a frustrating and emotional calling of the heart. But no one does it alone. GAL volunteers are supported by the GAL Program - Child Advocacy Managers, Child's Best Interest Attorneys, Circuit Directors, State Office staff and the GAL Appellate team. There are practice manuals, training, resources and people supporting GAL volunteers who all want the same result for each child – a safe, permanent home.

From the halls of the Legislature to the offices of Child Advocacy Managers and courtroom hallways, the stories of GAL advocacy are illustrative of one thing –there is much work to be done on behalf of Florida's most vulnerable children. Even though the GAL Program is reaching more children than ever, there are still children waiting for a GAL volunteer. The GAL Program is dedicated to ensuring that every dependent child has a story to tell. A story of a GAL volunteer who stood by them in court, who made sure they were able to do what other kids in their class do, and who was the one constant in their life. These are stories that teach us who we are – caring, dedicated, hard-working and tireless advocates on behalf of abused, neglected and abandoned children.

The GAL Program will continue to learn and to be guided by stories of advocacy and the hope that all children find their forever home.



Alan F. Abramowitz
Executive Director
Florida Guardian ad Litem Program





GAL

Guardian ad Litem

**A POWERFUL VOICE FOR
FLORIDA'S CHILDREN**

**FLORIDA GUARDIAN AD LITEM
PROGRAM**

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