



I am for the child[®]



Guardian ad Litem Program
2018 Annual Report

Abused and Neglected



When a child is abused, abandoned or neglected and cannot remain at home in a healthy, safe environment, he or she is removed and a court case begins.

The Guardian ad Litem Program

is appointed by the judge to represent the child's best interest and is the only one in the case that focuses exclusively on the child.

Children Need Heroes



The Child's Best



Interest is Our Only Interest

Florida's Guardian ad Litem (GAL) Program represents the best interests of children alleged to be abused, abandoned, or neglected who are involved in court proceedings. ***This means advocacy for things the law says the child is entitled to, such as a permanent home within a year, and working to ensure child-centered decisions are made by having a thorough understanding of the facts and the child.*** GALs visit children regularly to understand their circumstances, wishes, and needs, and to explain the process in a way they can understand. ***GALs give children a voice and help them find their own.***

The GAL Program uses a team approach to represent children using GAL volunteers, Child Advocate

Managers, and Best Interest Attorneys. GAL volunteers bring a community-based, common sense approach to children's cases. They are supervised and supported by Child Advocate Managers who help them navigate the complex dependency system. Best Interests Attorneys provide essential legal counsel, attend hearings and depositions, negotiate outside of the courtroom, and take on appeals. The unique perspective and expertise of each team member complements the others and all are critical in advocating for the best interests of children.

*"I am for the child...
it's the most sacred
oath that I know."*

~ Judge Jonathan Sjostrom,
2nd Judicial Circuit

A photograph of two Black women with long, dark, wavy hair. The woman on the left is wearing a light blue top and is looking towards the woman on the right. The woman on the right is wearing a bright pink top and is looking down with a slight smile. The background is a soft-focus green outdoor setting. The word "When" is written in white in the top right corner.

When

I remember like it was yesterday, Nikina on the floor of the crisis center protecting a child in a seizure. But it didn't end when the EMS arrived to transport the child to the hospital. She was the caring adult that went to the emergency room and stood beside that child's bedside. **Nikina was the voice** reassuring her. She was the adult who transported the child back to the center, making sure she was safe. Without regard for her own safety or obligations, she was there for the child.

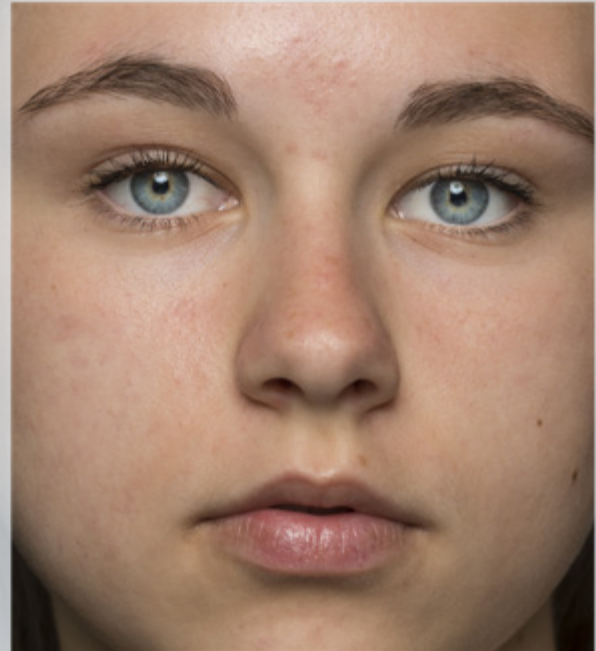
Children Need Help the Most

Human Trafficking. Substance Abuse. Runaway. 14.

She'd been in the system since 2012, and after her parents' rights were terminated, she'd frequently run away to be with her gang and binge on drugs. Though the child was a human trafficking victim, she was placed in non-secure group homes which put her in danger of continued contact with the gang. She badly needed someone to advocate for her best interests.

When she needed help the most, her GAL Team was there. GAL filed a motion to move her to a safehouse specializing in trafficking victims and providing intensive trauma-based therapy. They reached out to her biological mother and coordinated supervised phone calls and then a supervised visit. They got her into a drug treatment program.

When she needed help the most, people from her GAL team visited her daily. When it was her birthday, they celebrated with her all day. When it was time to start her substance abuse program, they were all at the hearing - passing the time by playing hangman on the floor of the courthouse.



She voluntarily chose the drug treatment and now she's stable. When she was able to spend a day away from the facility, she spent it with her GAL. She's participating in counseling and asking to have her gang tattoo covered up — a powerful signal that she will not let what came before mar a bright future.

"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."

~ GAL Volunteer, 11th Judicial Circuit



Thousands

Over **10,000** Floridians
serve as GAL Volunteers.

32,396

children under
jurisdiction of
dependency
court

Have Answered the Call...

2,211,648

miles driven

258,555

volunteer hours
donated

Volunteers collect comprehensive information about the child and family, and visit the child at least once a month to gain an understanding of the child's situation, needs, and wishes.

38,332

children
represented
so far this
year

25,232

currently
represented

11,022

GAL Volunteers



Providing Steadfast

This is Max's Story

- 10** Different Placements
- 7** Different Schools
- 4** Social Workers
- 3** Therapists

1 Guardian ad Litem

GAL volunteers are court advocates, but they are so much more to the children they advocate for. A GAL volunteer is the friend that is only a phone call away, they are mentors, they are teachers, and many times the only stable adult in the child's life.

Advocacy for Children

This is Dori and Phil's Story

- 10** Children
- 5** Separate Placements
- 4** Different Schools
- 7** Days of a **TPR** trial
- Multiple** Doctors and Therapists
- Juvenile Justice Involvement

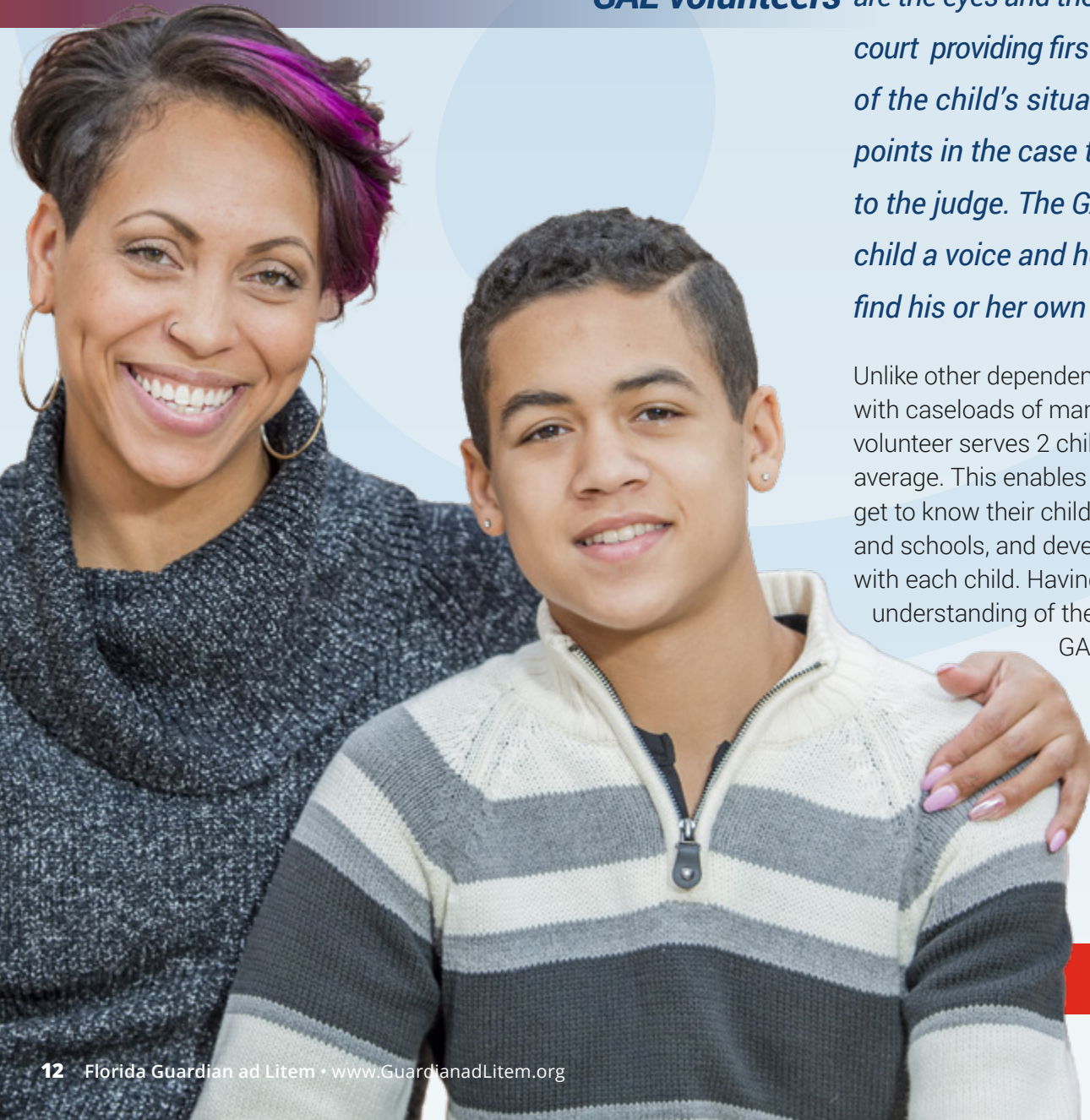
1 Goal: Best Interests

"When my aunt sent me back to Florida and I had nowhere to go, I kept trying to remember your name, hoping I could find you to help me again and when you walked in the door at the shelter, I almost cried."

~Teenager in foster care



Volunteers Enhance



GAL volunteers are the eyes and the ears of the court providing first-hand accounts of the child's situation at critical points in the case through reports to the judge. The GAL gives the child a voice and helps the child find his or her own voice.

Unlike other dependency stakeholders with caseloads of many children – the GAL volunteer serves 2 children at a time on average. This enables GAL volunteers to get to know their children, visit their homes and schools, and develop a relationship with each child. Having a first-hand understanding of the child enhances the

GAL team's advocacy because the case can be seen from the child's perspective and advocacy built around the child's unique needs.

Advocacy for Children

One of Emmanuelle's cases involves a 7 year old girl diagnosed with ADHD, Disruptive Behavior Disorder, PTSD and Disruptive Mood Dysregulation Disorder. The child had 8 placements in 3 years. However, she has a high IQ, and Emmanuelle recognized school was her safe haven where she had few behavioral issues. Since becoming her GAL, Emmanuelle has advocated for the child's school to not change, even when her placement disrupted. This has significantly impacted the child's emotional well-being and education. When summer arrived, Emmanuelle found a camp for children with ADHD and other behavioral needs. When the tuition was more than what the agency would pay, she sponsored the child with her own money. Emmanuelle is at every staffing for this child. She is in frequent contact with her therapist, teacher, custodians and case management team. She's facilitated contact with the child's sister on many occasions, even though she is placed out of county. Emmanuelle is more than an advocate for this child - she is a true friend and a force for good.



"... a true friend and a force for good."

She Needed a Hero...



In Miami-Dade, each new training class of GAL volunteers spends a morning in dependency court observing. On August 4th, Judge Cindy Lederman took questions from a new group of GAL volunteers. Then, the youngest member of the class, a 19-year-old pre-med student named Daniella, held out a snapshot to her.

"She pulls out this picture of her adoption," Lederman says. "She started crying, and I started crying. Everyone's crying." The photo, taken in 1999, shows a smiling Lederman in her chambers with Daniella, who had just turned two, and her adoptive parents.

Lederman asked her, "How was your life? How were your parents?" That Daniella replied she'd had "the happiest life" was balm to Lederman, who has been on the bench since 1989 and is known as a force in the dependency system.


"We had done the right thing for her, thank God. And look at her. She understands the enormity of the whole thing, and is going to come back and help children like herself. What a remarkable young woman."

So it has come full circle. "I wanted to give back to kids, but now it's so much more than that," Daniella says. "It makes me happy doing it."

Now a new set of photos shows Judge Lederman, smiling proudly, an arm around the new young Guardian ad Litem. "It was one of the best days of my career, no question," says the judge. "And it's been a long time."



That's What She Became



*"Please don't
ever quit doing
what you are doing
because you have been
the best Guardian ad Litem.
I have a lot of people that
promise me things and you are
the only one that follows through."*

~16 year old youth

In Every Court...

*The GAL Program has over 170 lawyers representing children's **best interests**. Legal advocacy of the best interests of children must be well-informed, proactive, and tailored to the unique needs of each child. GAL Best Interests Attorneys advocate for things like **expedited permanency**, compliance with statutory time frames, stability in placements and schools, appropriate healthcare, including mental health treatment, visitation, involving children in court hearings when it is in their best interests, and normalcy activities.*

"As Guardians ad Litem, we are the voice for children, but without our Guardian ad Litem attorneys, we may only be a whisper."

~ GAL Volunteer, 13th Judicial Circuit

I am for the child®

For Every Child

In the Nineteenth Judicial Circuit, a child, whose mother was deceased and whose father's parental rights became terminated, was placed with a loving foster family, who wished to adopt him. The child had been in the placement since the beginning of the case, and had a strong and loving bond with the family. However, the child was Native American, triggering the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) and the possibility that the child's case could be transferred to the tribal court far away. The GAL Best Interests Attorney, fully versed in ICWA, maintained close contact with tribal representatives and learned that a tribal family was also interested in adopting. The GAL advocacy team determined that it would not be in the child's best interests to be removed from this foster family in Florida, with whom he had lived for a long period of time.

The Best Interests Attorney worked tirelessly with the tribe, case management, and DCF to ensure the child could remain in Florida. After many lengthy conversations, the tribe was persuaded that it wouldn't be right to remove the child from his loving family in Florida and withdrew its request to change placement. Hard work, diligence and a thorough understanding of the child and the law led to adoption, and a victory for best interests.



Shaping State Law & Policy

The GAL Program appeared in over 580 appellate cases in 2017

The GAL Program's Appellate Team litigates in all of Florida's appellate courts, and this year defended a child's best interest in the United States Supreme Court. The child, who is now almost three years old, had been placed with a pre-adoptive family when he was six days old. On the eve of the termination trial, a man claiming to be the child's biological father sought to intervene in the case.

The GAL Program fought to prevent this 11th hour disruption of the child's permanency in the trial court and the Fourth District Court of Appeal, who refused to certify the case to the

Florida Supreme Court. The case then went to the U.S. Supreme Court through a petition for writ of certiorari. The GAL was the lone voice fighting for the child to stay with the only family he had ever known, filing a vigorous objection to delaying the child's permanency.

The Supreme Court denied the petition, paving the way for an adoption in time for Christmas.

The GAL Program also uses appellate advocacy to make systemic changes for children's best interests. The GAL appellate team has coordinated ***litigation to make case law more child-centered*** in the area of adoption intervention and in the constitutional

analysis of least restrictive means. The decisions of the appellate courts affect all children, and the GAL Program ensures children's legal interests are at the forefront in appeals, appearing in over ***580 appellate cases in 2017.***



in Children's Best Interests

The GAL Program advocates for systemic improvements for the thousands of children we represent

by championing legislation that furthers children's best interests. The GAL Program worked with legislators to pass laws allowing children to use **facility and therapy dogs in dependency court**, to give foster and adoptive parents **free access to state parks**, and to make permanent the Keys to Independence Program which **helps kids** in out-of-home care **get driver licenses**. In 2018, the Program is advocating to improve the quality of representation in dependency court and to expedite permanency for children through bills to streamline the identification of legal fathers and more meaningfully **engage incarcerated parents** in case plans.



Increasing & Improving

More Attorneys Defending Best Interests &

In 2017, the Program expanded pro bono opportunities in its “Defending Best Interests” initiative. Attorneys volunteer to write the legal argument in a child’s case on appeal with support from the Program. The initiative has received enthusiastic support, especially from the Appellate Practice Section of The Florida Bar. Attorneys help children reach permanency by defending judicial determinations of best interests, children benefit from advocacy by some of Florida’s top lawyers, and the state saves money.

Over 1,500 hours have been donated at an approximate value of \$450,000.

Representation of Children

Attorneys ad Litem for Children With Special Needs

Section 39.01305 authorizes appointment of attorneys for certain children with special needs, such as a developmental disabilities diagnosis. The GAL Program must attempt to find attorneys to serve pro bono, and if a volunteer attorney cannot be found, an attorney from a registry is appointed. The GAL Program is working to improve the number and quality of attorneys representing children. The Program provides training opportunities to registry attorneys, including providing scholarships to an annual conference focused on topics unique to these children. The Program is also working to remove barriers for pro bono attorneys to serve through legislation that will enable volunteer attorneys to have due process costs paid by the state.

Finally, the Program is collaborating with The Florida Bar Foundation using its Pro Bono Matters website to more effectively identify pro bono attorneys who are interested in representing children with special needs.

A Powerful Force...



The GAL Program is aided in its mission by the Guardian ad Litem Foundation which supports the Program and the children it serves through statewide partnerships, creative recruiting and retention initiatives, and pursuing funding opportunities beyond state general revenue.

The Foundation enables GAL to work with private individuals and organizations, by applying for and accepting grants, soliciting donations and coordinating with the twenty local not-for-profit organizations supporting the circuit GAL Programs. GAL advocacy has been improved through these partnerships, for example the trainings provided by Sunshine Health on topics including children's healthcare. Children represented by GAL also benefit from initiatives like those led by the General Federation of Women's Clubs, ("GFWC") which coordinates

fundraisers and donates birthday gift bags and Halloween costumes to children, and from donations by The Guardian Trust Foundation, Inc. and SunTrust. Through a partnership with the National Court Appointed Special Advocate Association ("CASA"), the Program receives contributions from Akerman LLP, one of the nation's top law firms, which donates volunteer and pro bono hours, and raises critical funds to help at-risk youth. CASA also provided the GAL Program with a grant to fund a recruitment campaign that included statewide billboards and movie theater posters and trailers in an effort to provide GAL advocacy to more children.

For Good

Coordinating Communities for Children's Best Interests

The Program is fortunate to be supported by a not-for-profit organization in each of the 20 judicial circuits. These organizations provide critical support to a wide range of Program initiatives, such as volunteer appreciation events, securing grants and even employing staff. They also give invaluable assistance to the children represented by the GAL Program from sports equipment to clothing, and even paying for services like MRIs when a provider cannot or will not pay.

In an amazing example of how GAL - including the non-profits - can connect children with their communities, one GAL Program and its non-profit literally found two teenage girls a home. In the Fifth Judicial Circuit, the GAL Program was representing two sisters sheltered after their mother was jailed and their father died. The girls wanted to live with their young adult sister but the RV she lived in was not suitable. The Program alerted its non-profit, Voices for Children of North Central Florida, Inc., of the plight faced by the girls, and within three weeks, Voices worked to obtain enough donations to purchase a used RV, household items, clothing, and more, so the family could remain together and in a safe, hazard free home. It is a shining example of guardian ad litem advocacy - a permanent home, creative solutions honoring the unique needs of the child and family, connection to the community, and a solid foundation for a brighter future.

*To All Our Wonderful Supporters,
Re: Teen Girls in Need*

*I wanted to update you about the girls in the RV - **We Did It!** With your help we raised over \$7,500 to accomplish what was needed for these girls! The girls thank you - they are so grateful and appreciative. Now for the results!*

*Yesterday we hit the pavement to talk to dealerships and ask for help. We got lucky at the first one because the sales lady was **Adopted** and this hit home for her! Then there was the RV just brought in by a Pastor who bought it to help someone that ended up not needing it. After lots of legwork we had an RV purchased! The sales lady and her crew threw in a TV and are making care packages for the girls!*

I'll be at the home helping the girls organize. We've purchased cleaning items, dishes, sheets, pots and pans, etc. I don't know how these girls feel at this moment but I can only imagine.

*Again, **We Did It!** And never would have been able to get there without you all!*

Thank you, thank you, thank you!



This report was prepared by the Florida Statewide Guardian ad Litem Office pursuant to section 39.8296, Florida Statutes.

Alan F. Abramowitz, Executive Director
600 S. Calhoun Street • Tallahassee, FL 32301
Office: (850) 922-7213

We would like to thank the National CASA Association for making the production of this document possible.

You can be for the Child

- Become a Guardian ad Litem or volunteer at a GAL Program office
- Provide pro bono services for children
- Donate to the Florida Guardian ad Litem Foundation
- Contribute your professional skill
- Support your local non-profit organization
- Become a corporate partner
- Host a special event
- Talk to your elected officials about the importance of best interests advocacy for children
- To advocate for children:
www.GuardianadLitem.org
- To join the Foundation:
www.FLGAL.org



Guardian ad Litem
FOR CHILDREN