

How Voices for Children

helped educator Sally Cohenour make the difference in life she was looking for when she knew it was time to give back.

When Sally Cohenour discovered Voices For Children (VFC) back in 2011, she instinctively knew the opportunity to train and work as a volunteer 'Court Appointed Special Advocate' – also known as a CASA - in the foster care system was just what she was looking for.

"I raised my stepson but he'd gotten to the point where he was independent, so I had empty nest syndrome,' explains Sally. 'I felt I'd been blessed with so much and it was time to give back. I wanted to feel like I was making a difference."

Sally first read about VFC in her local newspaper. "It immediately peaked my interest," she recalls. "Within one week I saw another article about VFC in another newspaper. And I thought, 'Okay, God, nudge excepted!"

After contacting VFC, Sally learned that the volunteer CASA program involved a 40 hour training course and required an 18-month commitment, which is the average length of time a child is in the foster care system.

Sally was told the CASA role would involve 10-15 hours per month, including preparing the court reports, and calling and connecting with social workers, foster parents and lawyers.

"VFC encourage visits with the child every 3-4 weeks, and they do a really good job of defining the role from the start. You're definitely not going to adopt this child." Guidelines include not giving your phone number to your case child, and agreeing not to invite them to your house or introduce them to your family.

"It quickly became clear that VFC had it organized for the protection of not just the CASA, but for the foster child and all the mutual parties involved," says Sally. "It was very organized, and clearly a well-oiled machine."

It was the statistics that sealed the deal for Sally, though. "When I began training, there were around 5000 children in foster care in San Diego alone," she remembers. "And I can't carve out 4 to 6 hours a month? How much time do I spend on social media?! If we all just put in a few hours every month, we can lower that number."

While most CASA's start with an individual child, Sally's first family was a sibling set of four, due to her professional teaching background. The youngest child was 2 and the oldest was 12. Their mother was 28 years old.

"I could barely take care of myself when I was 28, much less have four of my own kids, and her life spoke of that," says Sally. "We ended up having a decent relationship and communicating, though. She had some addiction issues and a significant other that was not safe for the kids. However, there are also guidelines for that – not to be involved and counsel the mother."

"My job was to provide safety and fun for the four children and to advocate on their behalf."



On her visits, Sally utilized the huge amount of resources VFC provides for CASAs and their case children, from holiday parties to arts and crafts events, museum visits and local activities.

"I always try to meet the child where they are at by listening," she says. "I ask and notice what they like to do for fun and set up outings or activities based on that.

"The key is to do what you say you're going to do. That consistency is so important for building trust, especially when the child has had so many people coming in and out of their lives."

Many foster children can be distrustful due to neglect or abandonment issues but while getting a case child to open up can be hard, given their often-traumatic family experiences, "actions are everything," says Sally.

"As a CASA, the most important thing is showing up and listening, and letting them know you're their person. Ask questions and be willing to share your life experiences. Some kids struggle to get past the labels that have been put on them."

Sally tells of an older boy who she says came from a rough situation. "He was placed in the local emergency shelter and he had this baggage that he was a tough kid. But he was a teddy bear!

"I encourage future CASAs that when you read these kids' reports when you first get assigned to them, don't judge them by what's in the report."

Every CASA is assigned a supervisor, who is hugely instrumental in supporting them along every step of the journey.

"VFC supervisors are angels.
They're there to guide you
through everything. You have
an open-door policy to
communicate and you get a
very quick response."

"They also prepare and support you working with the social workers, and they know best how to communicate with everyone and navigate the system."

VFC also hosts small groups for CASAs to talk about what's going on with their case children and share experiences. "You're never alone," says Sally.

An important part of the CASA role is to write the child's court reports as they go through the foster system.

"Before each court hearing, which is typically every six months, CASAs write a report about what is going on in the child's life," explains Sally. "The goal is to help the judge understand how the child is doing and if they have any needs that should be addressed. VFC give you the templates with numbered questions, so it's very easy. They help you elaborate on parts together by asking questions. They know you're busy and they want to help you fill it in."

Sally says the judge speaks directly off the CASA's report in court. "They know the CASA is the direct connect – the one that spends time with the child and sees the parents in action, sees the foster family, the school, the medical reports. So it's kind of empowering."

Once the child has moved through the court system, they are either returned to their family if the parent(s) have committed to their court-ordered rehabilitation program, or they are placed in a long term foster family, often with the opportunity for being officially adopted.

CASA's are allowed to keep in touch with a child once the court case is closed, "as long as you maintain those professional boundaries and you are comfortable," says Sally.



Sally has been a CASA for over 15 children since 2011. So what makes her continue every time a child's case has finished?

"You develop a close relationship with your supervisor and they walk you through the happy ending of a case situation and it's kind of natural to think, 'What's next?'" she reveals. "I'm a person of faith so I pray about it and have faith that that's my role. Often, I think, 'How am I going to squeeze out the time?'

"But if I make the time to do something for someone else then I'm always provided with more than enough time to accomplish what I need to."

For people interested in becoming a CASA but possibly nervous of their emotional reaction to helping a child in need, Sally advises this: "Before I started, I was fearful that I would get too emotionally close to the children and break all the rules. But it quickly becomes so clear why VFC has guidelines.

"You have a personalized coach in your supervisor who will literally walk you through every single situation. There's a script when you first meet the child: who to call first, second, third.

"And you get so many suggestions during the training about connecting with the

children, how to let them know, 'I'm your advocate. I'm going to be your steady, your constant'.



Of how being a CASA has impacted Sally's life, she is clear. "I feel really good about my contribution – knowing that I have a positive impact and seeing it in action, by giving the child the unconditional knowledge that I'm there to support them and be their safety net.

"Also, by seeing the resources for the child come together and the team of individuals be on the same page to support the child, whether it's to reunify or to find a forever home."

"I've had kids who have had 4 or 5 social workers throughout my time with them. I've seen them go through lawyers and I've seen their parents come and go. And I say to them, 'I'm just going to be here. You can rely on me being here.' The most important thing is just showing up – every time. It's critical."

"I'll never forget reading that statistic – 5,000 foster kids. It changed my life. I thought, 'We can make more babies, we can adopt children, but here are some kids that have a serious need. I always want to be in the mix because I know I can help. I have the time and that's my role right now. That's my part. And my family understands."



Sally's most recent VFC child is a 9 year old boy. "He was living on the street with his mom and had been bitten so many times by mosquitos that his legs and ankles became badly infected and he was rushed to the ER, where CPS became involved," she remembers.

She first met him at his new home with a "really solid foster family - just him, the mom and dad and 2 dogs, which he loves. He's one of the family and he's already calling them Mom and Dad. That happens a lot because they want that in their life."

"Not long after, I went to visit him for his birthday. He'd gotten up early and showered, which his foster parents say is hard because he's a boy's boy and loves to be rough and tumble. He'd actually asked for hair product, he'd brushed his hair, and he'd put on his foster dad's cologne for his 'date with Sally'!

"That's when I know I'm doing the right thing. At the end, it was time to go to his birthday party and he comes up and gives me this big surprise hug.

"In moments like that, the message is clear to me. All of us can do this. Maybe not at this moment but at some point in our life."

And Sally intends to be a CASA for years to come. "I don't know when I won't do it! I retire from the education system in 6 or 7 years and what a great thing because even more time will open up.

"I'll never be able to give back the gifts I've been given by these children – their respect, kindness, and love. When your case child looks at you and says thank you in words or you can just see it in their eyes - that's priceless."





Voices For Children provide the volunteer CASA program for foster children in both Riverside and San Diego counties, California.

For more information about the program if you're interested in applying to be a CASA, visit

speakupnow.org

