

National Foster Care Month

How a local volunteer made a difference to three local foster children

Pat Goellner, of Mason, admits she's led a sheltered life. "When my friends heard I'd become an advocate for kids in foster care," she laughs, "they thought I'd lost my mind. But this is the greatest, most rewarding thing I've ever done."

Pat is a ProKids CASA volunteer—a Court Appointed Special Advocate. After training, CASAs are assigned by the court to a child in foster care. CASAs make sure the child is safe, that the child's needs are met, and help each child move into a safe, permanent and nurturing home.

"I heard about ProKids after Marcus Fiesel," explains Pat, "and I knew I wanted to get involved. When I learned what a CASA does I thought, 'that's it! I can do that!'" Pat started CASA training in the fall of 2006, and took her first case in February 2007.

"These girls looked so small and fragile," says Pat, "I wanted to make sure they were safe." Cathi*, Erica*, and Katrina*, all under the age of five, had been diagnosed with Failure to Thrive after their pediatrician called 241-KIDS and alleged medical neglect. Children's Services got involved to investigate and to determine how the three little girls could be helped.

According to ProKids Training Manager Beth Turk, who oversees the 30 hours of training each CASA must take, "We work hard to prepare our volunteers for what to expect, and what they'll see on a typical case. Although the first thing we tell them is there's no such thing as a typical case!"

"The girls' parents were divorced," explains Pat. "The father—who had severe learning disabilities—had moved in with his mother." It would later be decided that the dad wouldn't be able to take care of the girls on his own. "The girls' mom stayed in the family apartment," Pat continues. "She was mentally handicapped, and it was unclear whether she had the ability to take care of them. The girls spent part of each week at each home."

According to Tracy Cook, Executive Director of ProKids, "Children in foster care have court hearings where important decisions are made about their future." These include decisions about the child's educational and medical needs, visits with family, and most importantly, where the child will live. "The CASA makes recommendations both in and out of court to make sure the best interests of the child don't get lost," explains Tracy.

After discovering that the mother's home was unhealthy, ProKids went to court and recommended that the children be removed from the mother's home. The magistrate agreed, and the girls were placed temporarily with Betty, the grandmother, who was pleading to have them live with her. "In the meantime," said Pat, "we would have to decide where the girls would permanently live."

According to Pat, the girls thrived under their grandmother's nurturing and disciplined care. Once the mother cleaned up her apartment, the children visited her on the weekends. "But," says Pat, "it wasn't long before I saw red flags emerging around these visits."

One of a CASA's most vital roles: keeping children safe.

Pat discovered the mother's new boyfriend was living with her. "He had just been released from prison and had a long rap sheet of various crimes. I didn't feel it was in the girls' best interest to be around him." The county didn't agree. Because the boyfriend's criminal history did not include child endanger-

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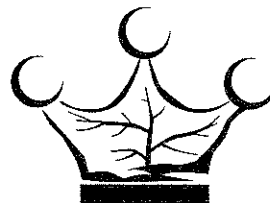
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In early April I accepted an invitation to attend a workshop conducted by the FBI in Atlanta. For two days fifty dentists focused on learning the National Crime Information Center's (NCIC) dental coding system.

NCIC is a computerized index of criminal justice information. In part the contents include criminal record history information, fugitives, stolen properties, and missing persons. NCIC is available to Federal, state, and local law enforcement and other criminal justice agencies and is operational 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. The purpose for maintaining the NCIC system is to provide a computerized database for ready access by a criminal justice agency making an inquiry and for prompt disclosure of information in the system from other criminal justice agencies about crimes and criminals. This information assists authorized agencies in apprehending fugitives, locating missing persons, and locating and returning stolen property.

While the workshop was sponsored by the FBI the instruction was dominated by a trio of accomplished dentists, each diplomates of the American Board of Forensic Odontology.

The weekend focused on two particular databases within the NCIC; missing persons and unidentified persons. Missing persons are exactly that, persons who have gone noticeably missing from their typical setting. Unidentified persons however, are individuals who have been found without identifying necessities. The vast majority of unidentified persons are deceased and are connected to a story of bodily remains found in various and assorted settings across the country.

A small portion of the data gathered concerning both missing and unidentified persons focuses on their dental status. It was this segment of NCIC's utility that called us together in Atlanta. When the system works at its best there is an attempt on the part of law enforcement officials to gather detailed written, photographic, x-ray and model records that define the dental history of missing and unidentified persons. On a daily basis NCIC automatically runs a comparative cross-check of the dental databases for missing and unidentified persons. Occasionally the dental data from a missing person matches closely with the dental data from an individual on the unidentified person list. Routinely NCIC becomes the vehicle through which law enforcement officials and forensic dentists put the final pieces of tragic puzzles into place.

Sadly dental coding has never been completed for the majority of missing persons. Dental records are occasionally neglected on the remains of unidentified persons. In addition the dental coding is at times completed by well-meaning but ill-equipped law enforcement officials resulting in errant dental data within NCIC that dooms the dream of an eventual dental match between the two data bases.

The Atlanta dental coding workshops reflect a new and growing effort on the part of the FBI to empower American dentists to find a meaningful place within their home communities to plug into the solving of these missing-unidentified persons puzzles. I look forward to learning how I can fit into this effort here in southwest Ohio.

Dr. Greg Davis

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ment, the county believed the little girls were not in danger. "I just couldn't accept that," said Pat. Pat advocated in court that the boyfriend should not be permitted in the home when the girls visited their mother. The magistrate agreed.

"I had a feeling the mother was not following the court's orders about visitation," said Pat. One morning Pat's fears were confirmed. "I stopped by the mom's home and was horrified to find all three girls in their mother's bed—with her boyfriend. They were watching TV.

Pat reported the incident to the caseworker. Again, the county felt Pat was overreacting. Throughout the case Pat kept in frequent contact with the therapist treating one of the girls. When the therapist mentioned the girl had talked about witnessing sexual activity, Pat advocated in court for all visits with the mother to be supervised. "For the third time, the county did not share my concerns. For the third time, the magistrate did, and ordered supervised visits."

"It took a year of court trials to get a safe, permanent, and nurturing home for these girls," said Pat. ProKids felt strongly that the mother was not able to appropriately take care of her children. "We believed Betty, the grandmother, was the best home for the girls. Betty had been an important and consistent part of these girls' lives since they were born. She was the anchor that gave the girls their first chance at a happy and healthy childhood. She loved them and they loved her dearly."

In October 2007, the court granted legal custody of all three girls to Betty. Their father, Betty's son, lives with them. He adores his little girls. Finally, the girls settled down, knowing they wouldn't be moved again.

Although Cathi, Erica, and Katrina had a CASA, not every child in Hamilton County foster care has one. Tracy Cook explains, "There are 1,200 kids in foster care in Hamilton County. In 2007, ProKids served 386 children. We believe the community can help us reach every child in need. I hope people reading this will understand they can change children's lives and will feel compelled to get involved."

ProKids is a non-profit that trains and supports volunteers to help keep foster children from slipping through the cracks of the foster care system. A national study shows that children with CASAs spend less time in long-term foster care and move less often. Abuse stopped for 99% of the children served by ProKids in 2007. For more information about ProKids, call 281-2000 ext. 201. Or visit www.prokids.org.

**Identities are changed to protect our children.*

ProKids CASA volunteer Pat Goellner, of Mason, helped Katrina, age 2, and her two sisters get out of the foster care system and into a safe, loving home.



Mason resident Pat Goellner made sure five-year-old Cathi* was safe while in the foster care system.

