

Sycamore resident bridges the gaps in foster care

by Chris Santoro

You don't always get to hear a "happily-ever-after" ending for kids in foster care. But Sycamore resident Mary Carol Melton, a CASA volunteer, helped make that happy ending come true for three young brothers.

"These have to be the luckiest boys in the world," claims Mary Carol. "It was a miracle."

Philip*, Michael, and Corey, ages 4, 2 and 1, were removed from their home and placed in foster care after numerous calls to 241-KIDS. The mother had mental

health issues that left her incapable of taking care of them. The boys had also been abused by their father, who'd left after a domestic violence incident involving one of the children.

Melton is a ProKids CASA volunteer—a Court Appointed Special Advocate. After training, CASAs are assigned by the court to advocate on behalf of 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.



As a ProKids CASA volunteer, Mary Carol Melton advocates on behalf of foster children because, "What could be more important than advocating for a child everyone else has abandoned?"

"In all my years of volunteerism," says Melton, who started training in 2005, "I have never felt the dramatic impact and importance of the work as much as I do as a CASA."

"What could be more important than advocating for a child everyone has abandoned? You just know you're making a difference."

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!"

Melton explains that the first foster home the boys lived in was wonderful. "Unfortunately," she says, "the foster parents had a difficult time handling the boys. They'd been through a lot and were difficult to take care of. The youngest wouldn't let the foster mother out of his sight without screaming."

The foster parents soon made the heart-wrenching decision to let them go.

The boys were moved to a second foster home. The first thing Melton did was visit the new home. "They were so needy and clingy," she remembers, "always fighting each other to make sure the other one didn't get more attention."

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

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both in and out of court to make sure the best interests of the child don't get lost," explains Cook.

Melton describes her role as a CASA

"I made sure the boys were set up to get the services they needed. To help them make sense of what they'd been through, the two older boys were connected to a child therapist. In addition, both were behind in school, so I made sure they got extra help to get them caught up."

A few months later, problems surfaced with the second foster home and the children were moved to a third home. By now the boys had had several caseworkers and three foster homes. Melton was the one person who had been with them the longest. "The boys improved just by having someone stable coming to visit them regularly. They were so excited to see me each time I came."

Melton worked hard to help the foster parents deal with the boys' behavioral issues. "We knew the mother was probably not going to get her children returned. The boys' behavior as it was would have made adoption difficult, if not impossible. Our goal at this point was to get them stable enough to be adopted as quickly as possible so they could settle down in a permanent home. Soon, the boys began to feel safe and loved. As this happened, their behavior began to improve."

By this time the mom's custody rights had been terminated by the court because she was unable to make the changes necessary to get her children returned. The father also gave up his parental rights.

The caseworker and Melton started the long process of finding adoptive parents. "We so much wanted to keep the boys together. They had already suffered so much loss." But not every family is willing to take siblings, let alone three rambunctious boys. "We found a loving couple willing to adopt, and everyone was amazed when they discovered we were going to be able to keep the boys together."

A happy ending...thanks to a CASA volunteer

Unfortunately, complications developed and there was concern that the adoption proceedings would be threatened. It was Melton who turned the situation into a happy ending. "Because I am a volunteer, I had the time to get to know all the parties and understand all the issues. I think everyone realized that I had only the best interest of the boys at heart and they trusted me."

Philip, Michael and Corey moved into their new home in the spring of 2007, and the adoption was finalized just before Christmas. "When I visited them," said Melton, "They were such different kids! They were happy, talking a mile a minute, couldn't wait to show me all around. They were so excited to have their own rooms in a safe place called home." Melton was thrilled to see how far the boys had come. **"The luckiest boys in the world"**

Melton sums it up, "These are the three luckiest boys in the world. It was a miracle we were able to get them adopted together; it could only have been divine intervention."

Although these brothers had a CASA, not every child in Hamilton County foster care has one. Tracy Cook explains, "There are about 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 about Mary Carol and these three boys will decide to get involved."

"They see themselves as a family," adds Mary Carol Melton. "Not as two people and their adopted kids, but as a *family*. Who could ask for anything more?"

ProKids is a non-profit that trains and supports volunteers to help keep foster children from slipping through the cracks of the 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 percent of the foster 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.

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