

Joan Heckard



- 8 years
- 4 cases
- 13 kids

Foster children typically move at least once a year.

CASA volunteers advocate for their children by inspiring them, guiding them, foreseeing the possibilities. But for Joan Heckard, it is her ProKids child who brings inspiration.

“I ask myself ‘What Would Keyasha Do?’” Joan says. “I am not as extroverted as she is, not as positive. No matter what, Keyasha says ‘I’m not going to let this bring me down.’”

When Joan met Keyasha she was 13 and in the Children’s Hospital Medical Center psychiatric unit. She was the little girl at the end of the hall, alone. Sitting on her bed, surrounded by artwork she had been creating, Keyasha was excited that Joan was visiting. “For some reason we hit it off right away,” Joan says, despite the deep trauma that had brought the young teenager to this point.

When she was 7, she had gone to live with an aunt. Her mother was addicted to drugs. But there was more troubling Keyasha: she told her aunt that her father had abused her. Her aunt did not believe her own brother had done such a thing. Keyasha became increasingly troubled and attempted to set her aunt’s house on fire. Immediately regretful, she told her aunt right away but clearly she needed psychiatric care. Her aunt did not want her back.

Keyasha’s voice was heard this time, and her father went to prison. Candy Stemple, the CASA Manager who works with Joan, says Joan was able to work with Keyasha’s mother. Joan told Keyasha’s mother how much Keyasha needed her and the only way she could come home would be if her mom got clean and stayed clean. That motivation led to the two being reunited.

Keyasha moved home under a protective order and Joan stayed in her life, advocating for her until the

case closed. Even after that, Joan remained involved with the family as Keyasha made her way through high school – graduating this past year – and got a job. Now a mother, Keyasha is planning to start at Cincinnati State this winter.

Joan’s relationship with Keyasha led to an unusual interaction when Joan started a new case at ProKids. Desiree, who will be 18 this winter, was only 2 years old when she was found by Detroit authorities living in squalor. Desiree was sent to live with her aunt in the Cincinnati area. But at 12, her aunt didn’t want Desiree anymore.

“She has nobody,” Joan says. “Everyone has left her.”

Desiree makes things hard for herself, Joan says, mostly because she cannot manage healthy relationships. Her Reactive Attachment Disorder, or RAD, makes her pull back and not engage with people.

“She has warmed up to me as much as she can,” Joan says. “Which is not much.”

But Joan had an idea. With Candy’s support and the approval of JFS (which had custody of Desiree), she introduced the two girls. “We went for pizza and I just sat back and watched,” Joan says. “I actually got choked up listening to the two of them open up to each other. Keyasha talked about things I’ve never heard her say and Desiree just opened up like I’d never seen.”

Desiree, who is pregnant with her second child, and Keyasha talk regularly with Joan and with one another. Joan says that Keyasha is able to hold Desiree accountable and confront her in ways no one else can.

“The stability she has helped these two young women achieve is now helping their own children,” Candy says. “By being there for both of them, Joan has helped them to be there for these babies.”

81% of ProKids children experience stability during their case and **100%** have a place to live when they age out of the foster care system.