

# For the Love of a Child

Child Advocates volunteer their time to make sure Fort Bend's abused and neglected children have a voice

Written by Carrie Garfield

Every child deserves to grow up in a safe, abuse-free environment. Unfortunately, that's not always the case. Luckily for the victims of child abuse in Fort Bend County, there's a special organization working to ensure that every child has someone fighting for their rights.

## Fighting for Kids

Child Advocates of Fort Bend was founded in 1991 to advocate for abused children in Fort Bend County. With its army of volunteers, the organization currently serves more than 400 children each month and has provided assistance to more than 8,000 children over the past 18 years.

The organization has two main programs: Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) and the Children's Advocacy Center. The CASA program is designed to advocate for the emotional, educational and medical needs of children within the foster care system. "We have 180 CASA volunteers who have undergone an intensive, 30-hour training process that gives them the tools they need to carry out their responsibilities," says Executive Director Ruthanne Mefford.

The mission of the Children's Advocacy Center is to help coordinate the investigation, assessment, prosecution, and treatment of sexual and physical abuse, while promoting healing and case resolution. "When Child Protective Services (CPS) removes a child from home or school due to suspected abuse, or law enforcement takes a child into custody, they bring them to the Center for the initial investigation," says Mefford. "We set it up so the child only has to be interviewed once instead of having to repeat his or her story five or six times. We try to subject the children brought here to the least amount of trauma possible. We have volunteers assigned to make them comfortable, and they also receive the necessary therapy here at no cost."



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## Providing Consistency

"We advocate for the child everywhere. We attend doctors' appointments and school meetings. We make sure kids with special needs are receiving therapy," says Pam Collins, a CASA volunteer. "We also just spend time with them. We take them to the movies or have lunch with them, depending on their age and situation."

To Collins, being a CASA worker is extremely rewarding and provides these children with much needed consistency in their lives. "We stay with the child the entire time they are in the system. It could be one year, five years, or ten years. Foster homes change. Parents come in and out of the picture. Case workers change. We are the only constant for these kids on a regular basis."

## Volunteers are Needed

Because of current economic conditions, child abuse cases are on the rise and more volunteers are needed to help the growing problem. "You don't necessarily think about it, but when times are not good, families are under stress, and people are losing their jobs, sometimes they act out in a negative way. Unfortunately, children become the victims and more abuse occurs," says Mefford. "We have lots of new cases coming in, and we are proud to say we provide for every child who comes to us in Fort Bend County. We turn nobody away, so now, more than ever, we need volunteers." If you are interested in volunteering with the Child Advocates of Fort Bend, call 281-341-9955.

### SLM

CARRIE GARFIELD is a freelance writer. She is the mother of three boys and resides in Fort Bend County.



## Child Advocate of the Year - Pam Collins

Child Advocates recently named Pam Collins as their Child Advocate of the Year for 2009. During her eight years of service, Collins has advocated for 19 children and has served on the Volunteer Council, as well as on numerous event committees.

"I was shocked when I heard the news," says Collins, who explains how she got involved with Child Advocates. "I had heard about the organization, and thought that when my kids went off to college I would get involved. One day I was driving and heard about the Houston chapter on the radio. I called to see if there was a Fort Bend chapter, and sure enough a training seminar was starting the next week."

When asked about her role as a CASA volunteer, Collins says, "I try to work really closely with the parents, because I know these kids want to go back home. The more I can get the parents the help they need, the more it helps the kids. CPS has such a huge caseload, and the parents get lost in the system as much as the kids do. They're doing nothing different than they were taught, and it's a matter of getting them the help they need to break the cycle."



Karen Sullivan is a play therapist who works with the Child Advocates of Fort Bend County

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