



## Director's Thoughts

November is National Adoption Month. It is a month where we celebrate our children who have been adopted, those families who choose to open their hearts and their homes to adopt children and to reignite the hope for those still waiting to find their forever family. And this month, I'd like to write about permanency and give you all a picture of how important of a role you play in that.

I spent the day recently watching the adoption hearings in Martin County. Finalizing an adoption can be one of the most rewarding experiences for a Guardian ad Litem. You work so hard and put in so much time advocating for children, ensuring their safety and well-being and providing them a constant comfort that someone is always on their side speaking up on their behalf. You go through the difficult, sometimes heart-wrenching, TPR process and all of the practical and legal hurdles that come with it. And sometimes that's only the beginning of the journey.

Sometimes we're reviewing prospective home studies, meeting potential caregivers, struggling through match staffings and adoption review committees and finally, at the end of it all, you find that family that will love and nurture your child and a family they feel safe and secure with. As the judge finalized the adoptions and the families lined up to take pictures, I was looking at the faces of the Guardians and case managers and attorneys in the room. They all had looks of pride, joy and satisfaction on their faces as they watched their months and years of hard work, collaboration and commitment pay off. It brought me back to my own son's adoption day and the three year struggle that preceded that day. And just as my son was fortunate to have a Guardian ad Litem who never stopped looking out for him, those hundred kids this year and the hundreds and thousands that will come after them will be fortunate to have their Guardian ad Litem on their side as well.

And while adoption is usually the best option for children who cannot be returned to their parents, Guardians are incredibly effective in helping our children return safely to their families. So far this year we've successfully reunified 225 children with their families and seen those families exit the system. This number doesn't include children who have been reunified and who remain in post-placement supervision. So in reality we've helped far more children achieve reunification. And, if we're being honest, most reunifications always come with a bit of a leap of faith. In every decision we make, there's always the moment when you ask yourself "what if?"

**Cont. Pg 2**



**Paul graduates as a Florida Certified Public Manager**

## Kudos

I want to thank all the Volunteer Child Advocates (VCAs) that covered cases as courtesy VCAs the last few months. Also, thank you to all the VCAs that kept up with their case (s), while being away for the summer. Whether it was writ-

ing your report, keeping in contact with the courtesy GAL, DCM and myself, appearing by phone for your hearing. Thank you to everyone!  
*Lovely Alexis - Jules, Child Advocate Manager*

Huge shout out to **Jenna Huttula** for donating her photography services to shoot professional new ID photos for the staff.  
*Nicole Hughes, Volunteer Recruiter*

### Inside this issue:

Director's thoughts Continued	2
Kudos Continued	2
Where do I sit?	3
Thanksgiving Baskets	3
End-of-Year Celebration	3
Volunteer Anniversaries	4
Employee Profile—Gary Bokas	4
Adoption Intervention Proceedings	5



## Director's Thoughts Cont.

What if they relapse? What if something bad happens? What if we moved too quickly? What if they haven't really changed? These are all questions that every child welfare professional asks themselves among the many dozens more questions you ask before considering a permanency option. Because permanency decisions are supposed to be, well, permanent and permanent is a long time when we're talking about a child. If you've ever found yourself losing sleep over these questions, you're not alone. In fact, you're in pretty good company! In times like those, my best advice to you is to lean on the support and expertise of your teams. Rely on your training. Step back and review all of the evidence and go where it leads you and eventually you learn to rely on your experience as well. These are questions I still struggle with when I'm asked to review a case or help with a permanency decision. I take comfort in knowing that the Guardian ad Litem Program has the resources to stay involved when a child goes home. I know that our advocates and our teams will continue to be diligent in their advocacy and in discharging their responsibilities to monitor and observe. And I know that statistically, our circuit has a high level of success when it comes to making the right permanency decisions. Our circuit routinely performs well above the standard and statewide average in terms of achieving timely permanency, placement stability, siblings placed together and

children who re-enter the system after achieving permanency. Over the last year, more than 85% of our children who have successfully exited the system do not return. And almost half of our children achieve permanency in less than twelve months which is well above the state average. And we are getting better over time as we learn and as new and better services and training are brought into our area. We're fortunate to have staff who are leading the way in continuing to improve and develop new strategies for permanency and safety. In recognizing Circuit 19's effectiveness, Gary Bokas, our Supervising Attorney, was named to a statewide DCF workgroup on improving the timely path to permanency. I am proud of our team and all of the work they do day in and day out for our kids. But I am equally proud of our volunteers who give their time and their attention to so many children in the community. Because while the accolades and the high performance measures are nice, and important indicators of effective advocacy, the thing that still gets me is the stories. The little things I hear that don't show up in the stat line so to speak. The GAL who spent an hour tutoring their child in math. The GAL who picked their child up and took them to the park after a rough day in court. The GAL who bought their child their first pair of work shoes so they could feel better starting their first job. Those are things that aren't necessarily reflected in performance reports

and data analysis, but they are as important, or more important, than anything else we may do on any given day. And I know those things are happening here thanks to you incredible people. I am every day humbled to be able to serve this Program, this staff and this group of advocates. Thank you for all you do. I hope to see you all at our upcoming holiday party on Friday, December 14<sup>th</sup>. For those I don't see, have a safe and peaceful holiday and a Happy New Year!

*Paul Nigro*  
Circuit Director



## Kudos Cont.

Thank you to **Patti Silensky** for having the Guardian ad Litem Program give a presentation at her Ladies of Praise Luncheon! Patti also took the time to share her heart and her story about her experience with the Guardian ad Litem Program to her group. - *Nicole Hughes, Volunteer Recruiter*

**Carol Devine** from Okeechobee was so nice to put an ad for the Guardian ad Litem Program in her HOA's newspaper in hopes of getting more volunteers. - *Nicole Hughes, Volunteer Recruiter*

**Barbara Roberts** invited the Guardian ad Litem Program to the Indian Hammock's HOA Fall Festival Trunk or Treat to help spread education about our program to her community. Thank you so much for providing a space for this to happen! - *Nicole Hughes, Volunteer Recruiter*

Shout out to **Marie Monte** for expressing a desire to build more fellowship and community within our team by suggesting regular meetings for the GALs to get together, build relationships with one another and lean on each other for support. Not only did Marie come with an idea and suggestion, but has taken the initiative to coordinate/facilitate these meetings. The first meeting was held on 11/13/2018. It was a great success and productive meeting. We greatly appreciate all who attended and hope we can keep this going! -*Nelson Sanchez, Child Advocate Manager*



## Where do I sit?

Have you been outside the courtroom or walked into the courtroom before your hearing and thought...where should I sit? You see the mother on one side, the father on the other side of the room, the caregiver in another corner of the courtroom and the child in a 4<sup>th</sup> area. It's better that we not sit by one of the other parents or caregivers so we aren't viewed by the parties or any attorneys as "taking sides" in the case. There are no sides: we STAND for the best interest of the child so that's why, if your child is present, we encourage you to SIT by them! (See what I did there?) If not, consider sitting with your CAM or any CAM that is present. Or with a group of GALs if several of you are waiting for hearings.

*Roberta Katz, Senior Best Interest Attorney*

## Annual Thanksgiving Basket Drive An Overwhelming Success!

Thanks to the generosity of Voices for Children, GALP program staff, our Volunteer Child Advocates and the community, we provided Thanksgiving Dinner for 55 families this year! This is a record for us. We'd like to thank the following persons for helping us to provide for our families at this time of year.

Voices for Children  
1<sup>st</sup> PSL Church  
Richard Bartfay  
Fred Bayless  
Bonnie Boaz  
Karen Brazauskas  
Dulce Cheney  
Sharon Corcoran  
Carol and Steve Devine  
Michele Dutkin  
Tara Fallacaro  
Tom Gerace

Ruth Hall  
Sharon LeVan  
Lynn Lewis  
Judy MacDonald  
Janet Mafucci  
Jelenny Marquez  
Louise Meagher  
Margie Miller  
Marie Monte  
Keith Morgan  
Pat Nigro  
Martha Parrish  
Michelle Parolski  
Scott Perry  
Julie Sambito  
Ellen Shafer  
Patty Silensky  
Betty Snyder  
Gary Tenpas



Harold Turk  
Tina Wess  
Christie Yount

If we forgot anyone, it was not intentional. Thank you thank you thank you to EVERYONE!

*Roberta Katz, Senior Best Interest Attorney & Brianna Apostolopoulos, Senior Child Advocate Manager*

## Annual End-of-Year Celebration & Toy Drive!

Friday December 14th from 11:00AM till 2:00PM the 19th Circuit Guardian ad Litem Program will host our annual End-of-Year celebration Open House! All volunteers are invited to attend and are welcome to bring guests.

This year's theme is Flannel and Frost. We will have music, refreshments and a photo booth. You may come and go as you please. While you are here you may want to pick up a gift for each of your Guardian ad Litem Children. We are hosting a toy drive this year and the response from the community has been wonderful!

You are welcome to bring a dish to share if you would like.

We hope you will all come and celebrate with us.

Jennifer Manis, Administrative Assistant 1



## Volunteer Anniversaries

### September

Lisa Becker 7  
 Sheryl Creekmore 4  
 Pam O'Neil 9  
 Myriam Rocha 2  
 Robin Braker 3  
 Sandy Burton 5  
 Rosemary Martini3  
 Jessica Rigal 3  
 Bradley Eddison 2  
 Joe Stagnitta 3  
 Judy Axford 2  
 Selene Desmond 4  
 Sherry Howse 4  
 William Clarizio 2  
 Angela Murray 2  
 Charles Garrett 7  
 Michelle Hudson 2  
 Kimberly Keithahn 4  
 Doris Plym 23  
 Gail Shepherd 2  
 Bi;; Usher 3  
 Pat Nigro 3  
 Eileen Roge 5  
 Susan Blaxill-Deal 3  
 Vicki Mingin2  
 Faye Orange 3  
 Bob Poller 4

### October

Joesph Soares 1  
 Carol Shoaf 3  
 Jon Page 4  
 Elizabeth Snyder 1  
 Kermath Ward 1  
 Mary Ward 1  
 Patricia Maldonado 1  
 Marcelle Monval 1  
 Quezzy Pierre 1  
 Ingrid Hazen 6  
 Daniella Truett 1  
 Mimi Walzer 3  
 Mary Zeller 3  
 Robert Zeller 3  
 Lois Holczer 9  
 Johnnie Lendman 1  
 Mary Lendman 1  
 Mary Jane White 10  
 Fred Bayless 4  
 Patricia Borah 1  
 Donald Mann 19  
 Stephanie Pocchiarri 1  
 Barry Barnard 7  
 Tammy Siegle 5  
 Julie Vargo 3  
 Linda Corrigan 3  
 Matthew Corrigan 3  
 Jennifer Mangold 1  
 Scott Perry 1

### November

Ms Maya Miller 1  
 Patricia Moynihan 10  
 Judith Bryan 4  
 Patricia Hammond 4  
 Neil Morgan 1  
 Anaisa Ramirez 1  
 Jo-an Amerling 4  
 John Amerling 4  
 Sanford Flack 1  
 Mona Bates 2  
 Susan Halley 2  
 Whitney Pratt 1  
 Laurel Robertson 3  
 Victoria Stromak 1  
 Sharon Corcoran 3  
 Steve Corcoran 3  
 Donna Leighton 6  
 Dulce Cheney 4  
 Elizabeth Froehling 2  
 Deborah Hogsten 4  
 Melvon Nobel 7  
 Bill Stahl 11  
 Cynthia Stahl 11  
 Connie Agler 1  
 James Gnad 2  
 Janet Maffucci 9  
 Paul Haber 2  
 Mary Monaghan 4  
 Michele Dutkin 2  
 Arlene Mighty 10

## Employee Profile—Gary Bokas



Gary Bokas was born in Akron, Ohio but grew up in Detroit Michigan. After high school he enrolled in Albion College in Albion Michigan where he graduated with a bachelor's degree in English and Communication. During the same time he also enlisted with the United States Marine Corps. During his service with the USMC he served at Camp LeJeune, in North Carolina, 29 Palms in Califor-

nia and did extensive cold weather training in Norway, Sweden and Finland. After leaving the service Gary moved to New York where he was a very successful server in a restaurant. But he wanted something more out of life. He wanted to help people. So he enrolled at Thomas M. Cooley Law School in Lansing Michigan. After his first year he transferred to Florida State University School of Law where he graduated with his Juris Doctor in 2008. Shortly thereafter he passed the Florida Bar and began working with Legal Services of North Florida, a legal aid soci-

ety providing legal services to the indigent. During his time with that program he worked with families in family law cases and families dealing with domestic violence issues. In 2011 Gary joined the GALP as a program attorney in Okeechobee County. In 2012 he transferred to Saint Lucie County. In 2013 he was promoted to Senior Program Attorney and in 2015 he was promoted to his current position, Supervising Attorney. Gary supervises our 8 person legal team. He loves being able to help people everyday.

**Dependency Court Hearings: a Multipart Series**  
**Adoption Intervention Proceedings**

Gary Andrew Bokas, Esq.

From time to time in dependency cases, parents choose to pursue a private adoption of their child or children, as opposed to seeking reunification or contesting a petition to terminate their parental rights. In this installment of *Dependency Court Hearings: a Multipart Series*, we'll be taking a look at the adoption intervention process and how best interest advocacy plays a vital role in these situations.

Section 63.082 of the Florida Statutes provides a method to allow adoption entities to intervene into the dependency court proceedings to effectuate adoptions. For the purposes of adoption interventions into dependency cases, an adoption entity can be an actual adoption agency or, more commonly, an adoption entity can be an attorney, licensed to practice law in Florida. In all cases, the Court must provide written notice of the parent's right to participate in a private adoption plan, including written notice of the required best interest factors in §63.082(6)(e), at the arraignment hearing, in the order that approves the case plan and in the order that changes the permanency goal to adoption pursuant to §39.621. When a parent consents to private adoption, that parent is executing the consent in writing, with two witnesses present. The consent is required to be notarized. Pursuant to §63.082(6)(a):

“If a parent executes a consent for adoption of a minor with an adoption entity or qualified prospective adoptive parents and the minor child is under the supervision of the department, or otherwise subject to the jurisdiction of the dependency court as a result of the entry of a shelter order, a dependency petition, or a petition for termination of parental rights pursuant to chapter 39, **but parental rights have not yet been terminated**, the adoption consent is valid, binding, and enforceable by the court.”

§63.082(6)(a), Fla. Stat. (2018). Once the consent for adoption has been executed by the parent or parents, then the adoption entity can move to intervene as a party in interest in the dependency case. At this point, the adoption entity will file a motion to intervene in the dependency case, which must be accompanied by the properly executed consent to adoption as well as a copy of the preliminary home study of the prospective adoptive parents and any other evidence of the suitability of the placement.

The moment the adoption entity files its motion to intervene for private adoption, the Guardian ad Litem Program will make a determination as to whether the motion to intervene, the consents or the home study itself is legally sufficient. If any of the required components of the motion to intervene are not legally sufficient, then a written objection to the motion to intervene must immediately be filed. The court will then set this for a hearing on the motion to intervene.

If the motion to intervene is determined to be sufficient, then within 30-days of the filing of the motion to intervene, the court must conduct a final hearing on the motion to intervene and the change of placement of the child. The Court will weigh a variety of factors to determine if it is in the child's best interest to modify placement of the child to the prospective adoptive parents, including, but not limited to:

1. The permanency offered;
2. The established bonded relationship between the child and the current caregiver in any potential adoptive home in which the child has been residing;
3. The stability of the potential adoptive home in which the child has been residing as well as the desirability of maintaining continuity of placement;
4. The importance of maintaining sibling relationships, if possible;
5. The reasonable preferences and wishes of the child, if the court deems the child to be of sufficient maturity, understanding, and experience to express a preference;
6. Whether a petition for termination of parental rights has been filed pursuant to s. 39.806(1)(f), (g), or (h);
7. What is best for the child; and
8. The right of the parent to determine an appropriate placement for the child

§63.082(6)(e), Fla. Stat. (2018).

The statute also states that the Court must issue a written final order on the motion to intervene, within fifteen (15) days of the conclusion of the hearing. The court can find that adoption by and modification of placement with the intervening, prospective adoptive parents is in the child's best interest and grant the motion. The court can also deny the motion, if it finds that placement with and adoption by the intervening, prospective adoptive parents is not in the child's best interest. The Guardian ad Litem Program is critical to the entire adoption intervention procedure, because the statute requires the court to make a determination that it is in the child's best interest to be placed with and adopted by the intervening, prospective adoptive parents. As such, the Guardian is key in presenting evidence as to the bond that exists between the child and the current caregiver as well as the intervening adoptive parent(s). Likewise, the Guardian can testify as to the relationship between the child and any siblings, with whom the child has been residing. The Guardian ad Litem is needed to present evidence as to what is actually best for the child or children in question.

Adoption intervention can be a useful means of expediting permanency of a child to a loving forever family, but it can also present situations, where the intervening, prospective adoptive parents are not at all a placement that is in the child's best interest. Like everything in child welfare dependency, it is a case by case determination as to whether the intervening party is a best interest placement, a forever family, or if it is not at all in the child's best interest and must be challenged, strategically and intelligently.

In the next installment of *Dependency Court Hearings: a Multipart Series*, we'll be taking a closer look at motions for out-of-state travel.