

# Guardian ad Litem Newsletter

March 2019

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## Director's Thoughts

It is hard to believe how fast 2019 seems to be going by. We have a lot of great things going on at Guardian ad Litem and I want to share several updates with you. First, as many of you know, April is National Child Abuse Prevention Month. We have a number of activities aimed at helping to educate our staff, child advocates and the community on the impacts of child abuse and how to better understand and break the cycle. One I'm excited to share with you will be a screening of the groundbreaking documentary, Resilience: The Biology of Stress and the Science of Hope. We'll be hosting the screening towards the end of April so stay tuned for updates on how to join us for the event.

April is also the time when we celebrate National Volunteer Week. National Volunteer Week is April 7<sup>th</sup> through the 13<sup>th</sup>. Not that there's ever a bad time to recognize and appreciate our almost 400 amazing volunteers, but if there's a perfect time it's definitely National Volunteer Week. During that week we'll be hosting our annual Guardian ad Litem Appreciation Luncheon on Friday, April 12. Invitations have gone out and we hope you will come and spend the afternoon enjoying each other's company, celebrating each other's tremendous advocacy throughout the year, and recognizing the great work of our child advocates and staff. If you haven't already, please RSVP to Jennifer Manis as soon as possible.

On April 13 we will be celebrating our everyday heroes, child advocates and children alike, at Be a Hero Night at the Mets. *Article continued on page 2*

## Kudos

**Nelson Sanchez** thank you for being a supportive CAM and always being available discuss situations and tackle hard problem.

**Louise Meager and Dr. William Jablonski-** Thank you for putting on the table at the St Bernadette's missions fair! You did an amazing job and I appreciate your team work.

**Jason Corbiere-** Thank you for inviting the Guardian ad Litem program to Cornerstone Church and speaking in front of the congregation on behalf of the Guardian ad Litem Program. You did amazing!



SLCFD Explorers receive tickets to Be a Hero Game

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## Director's thoughts, Cont.

The game begins at 6:00 pm but the pre-game festivities put on by the Jupiter and Treasure Coast Jeep Clubs begin as early as 2:30 PM. We hope to see you all out at the ball game!

I wish that I could share all good news. Unfortunately, our GAL family suffered a tragic loss recently. One of our young women previously served by the Program passed away in a tragic car accident. Some of you may remember the story of this remarkable young woman. After more than four years in the system, the rights of her parents terminated and her steadfast refusal to be adopted, her case was referred to the Permanency Roundtable team. It was her Guardian ad Litem that suggested taking a second look at the mother with whom the child had expressed many times her desire to be reunited with. And while many dismissed the notion as impossible, adoption by a biological parent through Dependency is virtually unprecedented, her Guardian ad Litem and her advocacy team, along with several key partners on her support team, refused to rule out any option. And so the slow, daunting process of attempting to rebuild this relationship began. Hours upon hours of staffings, treatment team meetings, legal research, court hearings and therapy sessions led to visitation and the strengthening of a relationship that seemed destined to come to fruition. And then finally it happened. I will only speak for myself, but being in the courtroom that day and witnessing that adoption is something I will never forget. The Guardian, the one and only Guardian who had been with this young lady for more than 5 years, stood up and read a letter to the family about her journey on this case and what the child had come to mean to her; the GAL attorney who personally drafted and filed the adoption petition because no one else could or would, and the pure happiness of mother and child as their long journey to come back together had finally been realized are just some of the things that stand out from that day. The Guardians, essentially family at this point to the mother and child, would send updates on her well-being since the adoption. It wasn't always perfect, and there were bumps along the way, but through everything mom and daughter were together and were happy. They were taken far too soon, the young lady just 18 years old. But they left behind a lasting legacy of love, of hope and of perseverance. Sandi inspired so many people. Her story continues to inspire. She will be missed.

Paul Nigro, Circuit Director

## My Guardian ad Litem Heart by Carol Devine

It was summer when I first looked into your eyes.  
Blue eyes that had seen more than a 2-year-old should.  
You were silent and could not show emotion.  
That day, my heart was breaking.

We met again and this time you sat near me.  
You were still silent, but I noticed a sparkle in your eye.  
This was the day you began to smile.  
That day, my heart was hopeful.

As you neared your third birthday you began to open up.  
You gave smiles freely and liked to sit on my lap.  
You began to speak to me, but in words I did not understand.  
That day my heart was joyful.

Fall arrived and you turned three with a cupcake party honoring you.  
You beamed as your classmates sang and made you feel special.

Then through the pain of rotten teeth you ate your cupcake with a smile.  
That day my heart was singing.

As the weather grew cooler and Christmas arrived, you were talking more than ever.  
We ate pizza together and I watched you play with your new Matchbox cars.  
When it came time for me to leave you gave me a hug and waved goodbye.  
That day my heart was full.

Today when I arrived and as soon as you heard my voice you offered your classic smile.  
You then did something you never did before, you ran and jumped into my arms.  
You spent the visit cuddled in my arms and this time I understood your every word.  
Today my heart melted.

In January, our volunteers watched a brief video at the St. Lucie County volunteer meeting on protective capacities and protective factors. After watching the video there was a group discussion on how this relates to assessing behavior change and assessing conditions for return with our families. In assessing a parent's protective capacity, you are directly looking at what characteristics they have or have learned, to ensure their child(ren) are safe if returned to their care. The hope is that through completing their case plan tasks and engaging in treatment, our parents will increase their protective capacities to reduce any future risks to their children and manage any potential threat within the home. The speaker also discusses the protective factors on an individual, a family, and a community level, and how they can directly impact the well-being of children. The speaker in the video, Chris Lolley, was kind enough to send me the PowerPoint that goes along with this video. If anyone would like a copy please don't hesitate to send me an email at

[Brianna.Apostolopoulos@gal.fl.gov](mailto:Brianna.Apostolopoulos@gal.fl.gov)

Don't forget to log your time in Optima for your training hours!

<http://centervideo.forest.usf.edu/video/center/2017abuseneglectconf/protectivecapacitiesfactors/start.html>

Brianna Apostolopoulos, Supervising Child Advocate Manager

## HELP IDENTIFY POSSIBLE CHILD VICTIMS OF SEX TRAFFICKING AND COMMERCIAL SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

Child victims of sex trafficking may look like the children you help every day. Children often do not realize they are victims of trafficking. Many view their exploiter as a boyfriend, and the process of breaking that trauma bond is time and resource intensive. Children who are trafficked may still be under the control of a pimp/trafficker, even after they are returned to foster care, a family home, or are rescued.

Children who are trafficked may have a history of repeated sexual exploitation or running away. Trafficked children often suffer from depression, hostility, stress, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and fear of authority, as well as fear of those who victimize them. Outward symptoms of depression, anxiety, or hostility may present as difficult behavior or resistance to assistance.

The presence of the indicators noted below does not definitively mean the child is a trafficking victim. These indicators serve as clues to be assessed within the broader context of all information presented.

Look for the possible trafficking indicators and red flags noted below.

- Chronic runaway/homeless youth
- Excess amount of cash in their possession (may be reluctant to explain its source)
- Hotel keys and key cards
- Lying about age/false ID
- Inconsistencies when describing and recounting events
- Unable or unwilling to give local address or information about parent(s)/guardian
- Presence or fear of another person (often an older male or boyfriend who seems controlling)
- High number of reported sexual partners at a young age
- Sexually explicit profiles on social networking sites
- Injuries/signs of physical abuse (that they may be reluctant to explain)
- Inability or fear of social interaction
- Demeanor exhibiting fear, anxiety, depression, submissiveness, tenseness, nervousness
- Is not enrolled in school or repeated absence from school
- Does not consider self a victim
- Loyalty to or positive feelings toward pimp/trafficker
- May try to protect pimp/trafficker from authorities
- Prepaid cell phone

If you suspect a child has been the victim of sex trafficking or sexual exploitation, it should be reported to the Department of Children and Families Abuse Hotline: 1-800-96-ABUSE

In addition, for further assistance, contact the National Human Trafficking Resource Center at 1.888.373.7888.

By Roberta F. Katz, Esq. Senior Best Interest Attorney for the Guardian Ad Litem Program and Chair of the Human Trafficking Coalition for the Treasure Coast and Okeechobee

## Motions for Out-of-State Travel

Throughout nearly any dependency case, there are, from time to time, occasions, when a child, who has been removed from his or her parents and placed with relative, non-relative or foster care, has the need to travel outside the state of Florida with the caregivers. Fairly often, court orders, permitting the child to travel out-of-state can be obtained by way of a stipulation, in other words, when all the parties to the case sign the stipulated motion, thereby communicating their agreement to the out-of-state travel. But what happens when one or more parties can't or won't agree to the out-of-state travel? In this edition of *Dependency Court Hearings: a Multipart Series* we'll be taking a closer look at out-of-state travel motion hearings and why they're important to the best interest of a child.

The order on shelter of a child from his or her parents, due to abuse, abandonment or neglect will nearly always contain language that permits caregivers to take children anywhere in the continental United States, when a state of emergency has been declared in the county where the child resides, so that the caregivers and child(ren) can evacuate safely without waiting for a court order. The caregivers can remain in the safe place, out-of-state until it is safe to return, but they must provide the Department with a phone number and address where they will be located, within 72 hours of arriving there. Thankfully, states of emergency don't happen very often. So, what about more common reasons for travel? A substantial majority of all relative and non-relative caregivers as well as foster parents have friends and family, who live outside the state of Florida. Indeed many of us have originated from places outside the state of Florida. Whenever a caregiver of a child under the protective supervision of the Florida Department of Children and Families is seeking to travel out-of-state with that child or children, a court order is required. If a caregiver were to travel out-of-state without seeking a court order first, this could potentially be grounds for removal of the child from that caregiver. The Guardian ad Litem Program and The Department of Children and Families are usually the moving parties, who file motions for out-of-state travel. The requests for these motions, of course, come directly from the caregivers. Quite often, case management will send a legal request directly to Children's Legal Services (CLS), who will then draft a stipulated motion and proposed order for the out-of-state travel. The Guardian ad Litem Program will also, when necessary, file its own motion for out-of-state travel. If all of the parties are in agreement, then each attorney, representing the various parties will sign the stipulated motion and the signed stipulated motion, along with the proposed order on the motion will both go to the Judge for her or his signature. After the order is signed, then the child or children are permitted to out-of-state with the caregivers.

A typical motion for out-of-state travel will contain the dates of the travel as well as the exact address and telephone number of the destination. The motion will also include the mode of transportation how the caregivers are proposing to get to the out-of-state destination. If by car, the motion will state who will be driving. If by airplane, then the flight numbers, with departure and arrival times. Sometimes caregivers take the kids on a cruise or out-of-the country. In this event, the total travel itinerary must be listed. In these cases, the children may have to have passports, which will need to be considered. There will also be a statement that travel is in the best interests of the child or children. Fairly often, if a travel motion isn't granted and this is necessary travel for the caregivers, then the children will have to reside in respite care, in other words, placed with temporary foster parents, i.e., people whom the child hasn't met, while the caregivers are out-of-state. Obviously, this is a situation we would seek to avoid.

An out-of-state travel motion will come to the court for a hearing, if a party can't or won't stipulate. If a parent can't stipulate, it usually means that the parent's attorney hasn't been able to get into contact with her or his client and therefore the attorney is legally prevented from stipulating to the motion. If a party won't stipulate, it usually means that the party is not in agreement the motion and the court needs to decide. What evidence will be provided to the court, in order for the court to make its decision on the out-of-state travel motion? Best interest evidence. Placement in respite care can be profoundly unsettling, even traumatic to a child, who is already dealing with the emotional upheaval of having been removed from her parents. We don't want to place the children in respite care, with complete strangers, while their caregivers are out-of-state. Therefore, testimony from the child's Guardian ad Litem as well as the child's therapist on how the child is getting along with the caregivers, the bond, the relationship, will allow for the court to understand what placement in respite care might mean to a child. Not only is the experience of the children in respite care important for the Court to decide, but how may that also affect the child's relationship with the caregivers, once the caregivers return from out-of-state?

Additional evidence presented to the court might be details of the importance and necessity of the caregiver's proposed travel. Is the travel out-of-state for a wedding? A funeral? A job interview? A family reunion? How long is the travel going to be? Has the child or children ever taken a multistate, multiday trip in an automobile? Have they ever flown in an airplane? Any medical problems which may be exacerbated by travel? Essentially, the court will hear evidence from all of the parties as to why it is or is not in the best interest of the child to be taken out-of-state with the caregivers. Yes, parents, whose parental rights haven't yet been terminated absolutely have a say in the decision making process of out-of-travel.

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# Dependency Court Hearings: a Multipart Series

## Motions for Out-of-State Travel , Cont.

However, a parents sole argument of, "I just don't want them to go out-of-state" won't be sufficient to prevent out-of-state travel from being approved by the court, if there is sufficient, best interest evidence from the other parties. The Guardian ad Litem Program very regularly takes the lead on this and is able to provide the court with critical, best interest observations of the children, which in turn allows the court to make an informed, fact-based decision.

In the next installment of [Dependency Court Hearings: a Multipart Series](#), we'll be examining Motions for Placement in Residential Treatment Facilities.

Gary Andrew Bokas, Esq.

### HELP WANTED



Are you reliable and dependable? Are you looking for a way to enjoy child visits without cumbersome court reports and court appearances? We have the position for you! Sign up to be a OOC Specialist today!

Many children have jurisdiction in other circuits, but are placed locally. We're in need of Volunteer Child Advocates to be the "eyes and ears" for those circuits. Duties include: regularly visiting children placed within our circuit, writing Contact Logs in Optima, and maintaining direct contact with the sending circuits.

For more information, contact Brianna Apostolopoulos ([Brianna.Apostolopoulos@gal.fl.gov](mailto:Brianna.Apostolopoulos@gal.fl.gov)) to volunteer as a OOC Specialist in St. Lucie County or Wendy Rodriguez ([Wendy.Rodriguez@gal.fl.gov](mailto:Wendy.Rodriguez@gal.fl.gov)) to volunteer as a OOC Specialist in Martin, Okeechobee, or Indian River Counties.

## Volunteer Spotlight—Michele Dutkin



Michele Dutkin has been a Guardian ad litem for the last two years. In that time she has been assigned to 9 cases and has mentored new Guardians through their field training. Michele has a hunger to advocate and learn more so she frequently takes opportunities to reach out to her CAM to engage in discussions and solicit feedback. Michele also looks for opportunities to learn more about the system and ways she can strengthen her advocacy. Michele takes the time out to develop a strong relationship with each of the children she works with. She goes on frequent outings with the children she is assigned to and is never apprehensive to jump in and help them overcome any issues they may have. In addition to this, Michele makes a concerted effort to build a relationship with the parents of the children she works with. It is not uncommon for her to reach out to them through phone calls and at times will even invite them out to lunch so she can relationship build and be a source of support. It is through all of these efforts and her level of collaboration that she not only exemplifies the core values of our program but is also strong advocate for the children she serves!

Wendy Rodriguez, Child Advocate Manager 2