



PROFESSIONALISM AND CIVILITY
ANYTHING LESS WILL NOT BE TOLERATED!

JUDGE
KENNETH L. GILLESPIE
PRESIDING

Guardian Ad Litem Monique Damiano, Judge Kenneth Gillespie, and Circuit Director of the Guardian Ad Litem program Kasandra Philips

FIRST RESPONDERS

WHEN A CHILD'S FUTURE IS DECIDED IN A COURTROOM,
A GUARDIAN AD LITEM HELPS HIM OR HER TO HAVE A SAY

WRITER GABRIELLE ROLAND • PHOTOGRAPHY JASON LEIDY

The whispers between a little girl and her teddy bear are private. And if you are an adult, they're off-limits. Judge Kenneth Gillespie, a Circuit Court judge from the 17th Judicial Circuit of Fort Lauderdale, remembers a little girl who took that relationship very seriously. At the age of six, she had been placed in a foster home. Each night she would confide in her teddy bear, but her foster parents overheard what they interpreted as her talking to herself. Concerned for her mental health, they sought a psychiatric evaluation. Afraid to lose her teddy bear, the little girl admitted to speaking to herself. A hearing was set and the psychiatrist's recommendation was a powerful psychotropic medication. What hope is there for a child who is afraid to speak up in this situation? Her rescuer was her guardian ad litem – the only adult she entrusted with the truth.

A guardian ad litem is a court appointed advocate for a child that has been brought into the dependency system due to allegations of abuse, abandonment, and/or neglect. According to Kasandra Philips, Circuit Director of the Guardian Ad Litem Program, the duties of a guardian include maintaining contact with the child and with all parties that have some affiliation with him or her (i.e. teachers, mentors, relatives, parents, counselors, etc.). The guardian makes recommendations to the judge based on his or her findings. They are expected to approach the situation objectively, considering the child's needs as paramount. Judge Gillespie says, "Their role is to make sure that the vision and the voice of that particular child is not lost."

Judge Gillespie first interacted with the Guardian Ad Litem Program in 2004 as a General Magistrate and has come to view the guardians as first responders. "They're usually the first on the scene in terms of evaluating, investigating, [and] assessing what the child needs," he says. They triage the case

from the very beginning, assessing every aspect of a child's life to construct a composite report of a child's needs and best interests.

Children usually enter the dependency system after traumatic events and in some cases, siblings are separated for the first time in their lives. Their guardian ad litem is charged with assisting in stabilizing a fragmented family. Monique Damiano, a guardian since May 2014, assumes this responsibility wholeheartedly. "I think we have great opportunities to make differences. It just takes a little bit of time and caring and it's something the child will never forget."

Damiano believes the work of a guardian is one of relationship building. The dependency division can feel unstable for children. The program adheres to its mission, which states: "I am for the child." For Damiano, these words carry tremendous weight. She says, "I am the invisible arms that are wrapped around that child to make sure she is safe and has everything that she needs."

A guardian ad litem and special advocate coordinator for over three years, Stacey Feldman credits the program with helping her to become a better parent. She says, "I don't think it's time consuming, because I absolutely love doing it. That's why I sought out a position."

In the last 18 months, dependency cases have increased by approximately 40 percent due to many factors including the rise in the use of Flakka, a newly popular, illegal, synthetic drug. Judge Gillespie alone currently handles 534 active cases involving children and there are four additional judges in the Dependency Division. More children in the dependency system mean a current shortage of their direct allies in the courtroom.

For more information, attend a weekly information session held on Wednesday afternoons at noon in the Guardian Ad Litem Program office. Additional details are available at www.galbroward.org. 