

Florida Guardian ad Litem Program 2013 Status Report

A Voice Heard: Building Trust and Hope



April 4, 2013

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A Voice Heard: Building Trust and Hope is the 2013 status report required under Florida Statutes, section 39.8296. In truth, the title should probably read, “*Building Trust and Hope through Transportation.*” For it is through transportation of abused and neglected children that Guardian ad Litem volunteers across the State of Florida have strengthened their bonds with dependent children and touched their lives in a way that is priceless and often, profound.

The first *A Voice Heard* report, published in February 2012, presented a call for normalcy through the words of children in the dependency system. The 2012 Florida Legislature heard those voices, and unanimously enacted legislation to permit Guardian ad Litem volunteers to transport children whom they serve. This report documents the results of this action, from the perspective of both the children and the Guardians ad Litem.

In these pages, you will read the stories of children and teens who have come to trust their Guardians as they trust no other as a result of time spent together doing things other children take for granted. “During our time in the car and at dinner, I am able to share things with you I haven’t shared with anyone else,” said one child. Simple, everyday outings are often “firsts” for these children. One high school student declared, “Most places you have taken us we have never seen before.” Often, brothers and sisters are reunited through the work of dedicated volunteers who are willing to transport them for visitation.

The Guardian ad Litem Program wishes to thank the children, teens and volunteers who made this report possible through their open and honest answers to our surveys and interviews. Dr. Bonnie Marmor, Chair of the Guardian ad Litem Foundation Board of Directors, deserves special thanks for overseeing this study and compiling this report.

Most especially, we wish to thank the members of the 2012 Florida Legislature, who voted unanimously to pass Senate Bill 1960 so that Guardians ad Litem would be permitted to transport their children. The impact of their action is far-reaching, and has strengthened relationships between volunteers and children in ways that bring trust and hope to the lives of children who deserve our best. One volunteer tells of a 17-year old who had lost hope of going to technical school. The volunteer made an appointment for the teen at Vocational Rehabilitation, transported him to the appointment, and after that, “things just started to happen. Good things, like funding for his schooling, textbooks and supplies. There was hope and happiness.”

On behalf of the more than 1,000 Guardian ad Litem volunteers who have been approved to transport their children, on this GAL Day 2013, we thank you all for making this step forward a reality.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Alan Abramowitz". The signature is fluid and cursive, written in a professional style.

Alan Abramowitz

April 4, 2013

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In February 2012, the Guardian ad Litem (GAL) Program (the Program) published *A Voice Heard*. In this report, 152 elementary, middle and high school students, as well as former foster youth, were asked a series of questions to determine their experiences with and expectations of their GAL volunteer. The results were compiled and analyzed for common themes to assist the Program in improving its advocacy both within the courtroom and in the community. The themes that emerged taught us that young people want four things:

Personal Interest – Caring, Concern and Emotional Support;

Advocacy – Judicial, Educational and Situational;

Communication – Talking, Listening and Understanding, and

Trust – Responsiveness, Honesty and Reliability.



These findings have been used to improve GAL training, build a strategic plan, and create a scorecard to ensure accountability for the children we serve. The significance of the youthful voices made it clear that we must continue to engage children in these conversations...fine-tuning our Program model and sharing the results with others who can make an impact on the quality of their lives.

During the 2012 Florida Legislative Session, statutory language was passed which gives Guardians ad Litem the authority to transport the children they represent. Subsequently, the Program launched a second initiative, *A Voice Heard: Building Trust and Hope*, focusing on the benefits of transportation for children represented by the Program. A survey was conducted in late 2012 to gauge the success of the transportation option. Comments from the children as well as the volunteer GALs clearly confirm that this option has had many very positive outcomes, such as:

- An improved relationship between children and their GAL volunteers;
- Greatly expanded normalcy experiences for children living in foster or group homes;
- More effective advocacy for dependent children based on the GAL volunteers' increased knowledge of the children's needs and desires; and
- The increased likelihood that children leaving the dependency system will be better prepared for a successful and fulfilling future.

The contents of this report provide information which: (1) document the benefits resulting from the authorization to transport, and (2) demonstrate how this change has enhanced the capacity of the Guardian ad Litem Program to serve the best interests of children.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

A Voice Heard – the first report:

The first *A Voice Heard* report clearly communicates that youth in the foster care system do not want to be different. Although circumstances have seriously altered their family relationships, friendships, and community connections, these young people consistently articulated their desire - their need - to be normal. The abused, abandoned and neglected children with whom GAL volunteers work want the right to be viewed and accepted as a member of their peer group. These young people seek the opportunity to do what their friends do: participate in extracurricular activities, drive, date, go shopping, sleep overnight at a friend's house, and visit family members.

Responses from 152 elementary, middle and high school students reveal that these students have their own ideas on how to change the foster care experience:

“I want to go places – anywhere; I want to go to the museum – any type of museum”

“I would like to go shopping and have a meal together.”

“I want you to be able to take me places without relying on someone else. “

“I wish you could pick me up and go do things.”

Several former foster youth interviewed for the project voiced regret that during their time in foster care, GAL volunteers were unable to transport them. The following account summarizes what many of these young people felt about how much it would have meant to them if they could have been transported.

“It would have been nice if my GAL could have transported me. If so I wouldn't have missed my Aunt's memorial service. I asked my GAL to take me that Sunday, but she said she would have liked to but she couldn't because she wasn't allowed to transport. It was the weekend and the group home ran on what they called a “skeleton crew” so I missed the memorial service. I just always knew that my GAL would have done things like that for me if she had been allowed to.”

The Transportation Pilot Study:

For the past 14 years, the Program's authorizing statute did not allow GAL volunteers to transport children for any reason. During this time, there was a growing belief among volunteers that this prohibition should be reconsidered. Results from a March 2011 survey indicated that most GAL volunteers were in favor of the transportation option in certain situations.

To further assess the value of providing volunteers with a transportation option, a Transportation Pilot Project (Pilot) was initiated in June 2011. The Pilot sought to determine whether allowing volunteers to transport children would accomplish two goals: (1) improving the relationship and communication between the child and his or her GAL volunteer and (2) promoting normalcy for children. At the end of the Pilot in January 2012, 40 volunteers and 20 child participants completed surveys about their

experiences. They overwhelmingly agreed that the goals of the Pilot had been achieved and that the children with whom GAL volunteers work had benefitted from being transported. These benefits included: child safety, better communications, a more normal life for the children, volunteer empowerment and volunteer retention.

Legislative Authorization:

With the passage of Senate Bill 1960, unanimously supported by both the Florida Senate and the House of Representatives, and fully endorsed by Governor Rick Scott, GAL volunteers were legislatively empowered to transport children in care.

Florida Statute § 39.8296(2)(b)(7) states that “In an effort to promote normalcy and establish trust between a court appointed volunteer guardian ad litem and a child alleged to be abused, abandoned, or neglected under this chapter, a guardian ad litem may transport a child. However, a guardian ad litem volunteer may not be required or directed by the program or a court to transport a child.”

The purpose of allowing Guardian ad Litem (GAL) volunteers to transport children is to promote social, extracurricular and enrichment activities for children and to foster communication and relationships which in turn enhance child safety by facilitating trust between the volunteer and child. Participation is on a voluntary basis.



Volunteers who have applied and been approved to transport have many special stories to relate about the positive difference this change has made in the life of “their kids” and their relationship with them. Currently, more than 1,000 of Florida’s 8,215 volunteers are authorized to transport the children to whom they are assigned.

Information Gathering:

The information for this report was gathered as a result of a three-step process.

1. A total of 89 youth in foster care were interviewed by their GAL volunteers to determine their reactions to being transported.
2. Three hundred thirty (330) transportation-eligible GAL volunteers responded to an online survey focused on the usefulness of being able to transport.
3. A subset of 64 GAL volunteers responding to the online questionnaire was personally interviewed by Circuit staff members to better understand their experiences as a transporter.

The questions posed to the children were developed in consultation with a child psychologist to ensure suitability. The information was obtained through conversations between GAL volunteers and the

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children with whom they are currently working. This inquiry is not intended to be a formal research project. Rather, it is an opportunity for the sharing of thoughts about the impact of a change in Program policy, i.e., how that change has continued to advance Program accountability and strengthen the capacity of GAL volunteers to serve the best interests of children.



THE CHILDREN SPEAK

The life-changing impact the authorization to transport has had on children in the dependency system can be heard by listening to their voices.

In response to a series of questions, children from the ages of five (5) to 18 years of age told of their excitement at being able to spend time with their GAL outside of a group, foster, or relative caregiver home. In their own words, they conveyed their delight at being able to go shopping, eat in a restaurant, spend time with their siblings, experience an “adventure,” or “just hang out.” Each of the 34 elementary school students, 29 middle school students and twenty-six 26 high school students were asked the same six questions. The words which follow will clearly illustrate that children are enjoying and benefitting from being able to ride in their GAL volunteer’s car.

Question 1: How do you feel about my being able to take you places? What do you like most or least about it?

“I like it. – I love it. – It’s great. – It’s fun. – It makes me happy. – There’s nothing I dislike.”

Regardless of the age of the children to whom this question was posed, the above words were repeated over and over. Their reasons included:

- Being able to get away from the house or the shelter;
- Seeing my brother or sister who live in a different home;
- Going places I have never been;
- Doing different things;
- Spending more time with my GAL and getting to know him/her better;
- Having the privacy to talk with no one else around, and
- Talking about anything and knowing you won’t repeat what I share with you.

As stated by one high school student:

“I love the freedom of getting away from everything. Melissa often takes me places that I have never been; we end up sharing a lot that we would most likely never have talked about.”

Question 2: Where do you most enjoy going with me?

Although the words “anywhere” and “everywhere” were used frequently, it should not be a surprise that the top two choices of virtually all of the students interviewed were shopping and eating out! Going to “the mall,” eating at McDonald’s or Panera’s, drinking coffee at Starbucks, or being treated to ice cream at Dairy Queen or some other ice cream store were mentioned most frequently. Older youth seemed to like being introduced to new foods, such as Japanese fare, crab cakes, chicken tortilla soup, or Mississippi mud cake. Other favorite places to go included bowling, playing pool, or the park.

One middle school young lady spoke of a more serious mission to be accomplished with the help of her GAL volunteer. For this child, the most enjoyable place to go was, “To visit my grandma in the hospital or rehab facility.” Later in the interview, in response to another question, the young lady revealed that it made her very happy when the GAL drove her to see her grandma for the first time in over a month. According to the volunteer, the father of this 13 year old is deceased and her mother is in prison. Her grandma is her only relative and is very sick. The child has no other family living in the area that is able to care for her or provide transportation. So, the only communication this child had with her grandmother was by phone. She really felt alone and desperately wanted to see her grandmother.

Question 3: How has it helped you trust me and to share more information with me because I have been able to take you places away from your foster home, group home or relative caregiver home?



The replies to this question indicate that there is a developmental process to the growth of trust and a child’s willingness to share information with the GAL volunteer assigned to his/her case. Once children become better acquainted with their GAL volunteer, it appears their willingness to talk with him/her quickly follows. As children learn it is safe to communicate with their GAL volunteer, they gain confidence that they can safely reveal painful memories. Ultimately, children come to appreciate that their GAL volunteer not only listens but also cares.

“I get to know you better when we can spend more time together and we have more time to talk.”

“It gives us more time to connect and to get to know each other.”

“It’s easier and more comfortable to talk to you and get to know you better.”

“During our time in the car and at dinner, I am able to share things with you I haven’t shared with anyone else.”

“(Being transported by my GAL volunteer) has helped me by not only telling me but showing me people out there care...amazing people. It has given me hope and on bad days, it has saved me from a day of depression and loneliness. I appreciate (it) so much.”

Question 4: Tell me about any time that you remember when I took you somewhere that made you very happy.

In general, the responses to this question did not differ substantially from those in Question 2. Places to shop and eat were definitely the top two votes on the “somewhere that made you happy” list. Several of the younger children, however, had a different type of memory that brought them happiness:

“I remember being happy when you brought Joseph (a brother who lives elsewhere) to see us and sad when you left with him.”

“The first time we went to see my brothers and sisters at the park.”

“When you took me to the mall where we eat and I played on the playground with my sister (who lives in another home).”

Question 5: Tell me about somewhere I took you that you had never been before.

The list of “first time ever” events spanned such diverse activities as:

- spending time at Tarpon Springs;
- making something in a pottery making place;
- driving a race car at the Andretti Theme Park;
- having a manicure and pedicure;
- touching a shark in a Marine Park;
- visiting Busch Gardens;
- sitting in a fire truck and talking to a fireman;
- going bicycle riding in a park, and
- going to the library (“because I have never seen one before except for the one in school”).

A very special treat for some of the children was temporarily being part of a GAL’s everyday life:

- “Going to your house for Christmas dinner.”
- “I really liked seeing your house and being there.”
- “Being at a bonfire with people you know.”
- “Going to the (GAL’s) art gallery.”



Answers to the following question reinforced the fact that activities other children take for granted are often exciting first time events for children in the dependency system.

The assessment of one high school student says it all: “Most places you have taken us we have never been before.”

Question 6: Why do you think I enjoy taking you places?

The responses to this question are inspiring to any child advocate. Regardless of the age of the child interviewed, the answers reflect the affection that children and GAL volunteers have for one another. Children value one-on-one time with their GAL volunteer and this private time has resulted in deeper, more trusting connections. It is clear from the quotes below that the new transportation policy has

provided dependent children with more support to deal with their frequently tumultuous, insecure and unpredictable lives.

Replies to this question generally began with the word “**Because**” and were then followed by the words “we,” “I” or “you.” The majority of these replies are serious...some are funny...all are valuable insights into how the children feel about their relationship with their GAL volunteer.

❖ We...

- “Can spend time together;”
- “Like each other;”
- “Can bond together;”
- “Can spend time by ourselves;”
- “Always have fun together when we go places;”
- “Can talk and get to know each other better;” and
- “Are doing something different and it gives us a lot of new things to talk about and share. We have our own memories.”

❖ I...

- “Am so much fun;”
- “Am your most awesome-ist kid ever;”
- “Am cool to talk with;” and
- “Am like a daughter to you. You want to share with me. You like having me around.”

❖ You...

- “Like me very much and like to spend time with me;”
- “Like to see me happy;”
- “Get to spend more time with me and learn about me;”
- “Enjoy me and my company;”
- “Like doing special things for us, like when you bring us cookies that you make;”
- “Are really nice and really listen to me;”
- “Are my Guardian and really care about me;”
- “ Are my friend;”
- “Like dealing with kids and seeing their expressions;”
- “Are a caring person who gives so much more than you will ever know. I greatly appreciate you;” and
- “Have said ‘What a joy I am to spend time with so I’m guessing I’m not that bad of a person to be around...and that you enjoy my company.’”

❖ And, not to be overlooked, a category titled “Kids Have the Most Interesting Ideas...”

- “You can get to know me better and get to enjoy people and not just spend your time alone;”



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- “You can have girl time with a younger girl. And to get away from work for a while;”
- “You can get out, too, so you are not stuck in the house;” and
- “You can do special things with me. You have all sons and you like doing girl things with me.”

The feedback above presents a number of reasons the children interviewed consider their GAL volunteer to be their friend and confidant. However, several of the children interviewed offered an even more compelling response to this last question. When asked why they thought their GAL enjoys taking them places, their answer was simple but powerful...“Because you love me.”



VOICES OF THE GUARDIANS

In response to the online survey question: "What have you seen as the benefits of transporting your child/children?" the most frequently selected responses were:

- *An improved relationship with my child.....91.3% or 251 respondents*
- *Better communications with my child.....89.5% or 246 respondents*
- *Knowing my child better.....87.6% or 241 respondents*

Volunteer GALs cited three specific ways in which the relationship with their child/children improved as a result of being able to transport:

- ❖ More open, uninhibited and varied communications involving every day activities as well as the sharing of personal feelings.
- ❖ The opportunity to forge a bond built on trust.
- ❖ The ability to observe the child/children's behavior and interactions in settings other than the group or foster home.
 - "(Transporting) has allowed the child to open up and share things not previously shared. This gave me better insight into this child and all she is dealing with."
 - "Being able to transport this child has enabled him to develop a sense of trust in an adult, a sense that someone cares about him and a sense that his needs and desires are heard, understood and can be met. Trust has been established. He has worth as an individual."
 - "I was able to see behaviors that I did not see on visits to her group home that I was able to relay to her therapist."

Explanations for this strengthened relationship included:

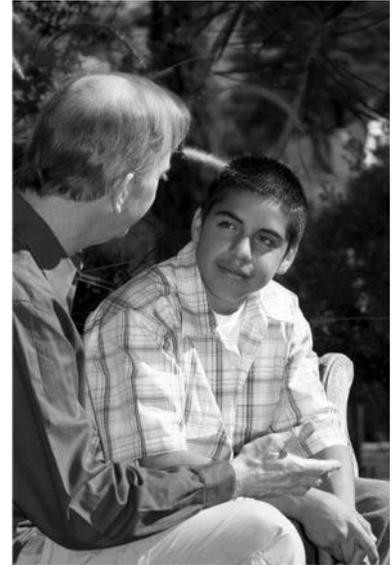
- ❖ One-on-one time.
- ❖ A more natural, peaceful and comfortable setting.
- ❖ Relief from the current living situation.
- ❖ Privacy.
- ❖ A Feeling of Safety.
 - "I am able to spend more quality time with my child outside of her home environment which is a shelter filled with kids. It gives her a weekly break from her life in the shelter and something to look forward to. "

- “We went out to dinner. We were able to talk freely, which does not happen in the home during visitations, since other adults are there monitoring everything the child says.”

Experiences provided by volunteers to the children with whom they work span an assortment of activities:

- ❖ Fun Activities
- ❖ Educational Activities
- ❖ Instructional Activities
- ❖ School and Community Activities

- “I took them trick or treating for Halloween at the mall. We had a blast, and they were thrilled to be doing something that other “normal” kids take for granted and would not have been able to do otherwise.”
- “A trip to Lion Country Safari was memorable because my child had a fun-filled day and really enjoyed the outdoors and learning experiences about animals. She took pictures all day long, asked staff numerous questions, etc. She not only had fun but learned a lot too!”
- “She had always been interested in music but with moving frequently for over ten years, there was never the opportunity or stability to provide music lessons. I was able to drive her to a music store to look at guitars. Suncoast Voices for Children provided a very generous donation and I drove her back with the check so that she could buy the guitar and sign up for music lessons. It has really given her something positive to work on this last year in foster care. I have never seen her happier than the day she bought the guitar!



To a dependent child, the benefits of being transported are beyond measure. Transportation has:

- Preserved sibling relationships and maintained family connections:
“I have a 9 year-old boy on one of my cases who requested that he be allowed to visit his 2 year old sister who is on another one of my cases. I made arrangements with his caregivers (grandparents) to transport the child to a place where I had made my arrangements for the foster parents to bring his sister. It was truly beautiful to watch these children connect with each other.”
- Brought solace and closure to dependent youth trying to cope with the death of a parent:
“The children were hurting and very confused about their mother dying and the reasons surrounding it. Also, they had not had any family contact in many years. Parental rights had been terminated. Attending the funeral they were able to see family members including the

father and sister. Many aunts, uncles, cousins, and family friends were there and offered support to them. This also opened the lines of communication for the children to start possibly having family visits.”

- Helped assure well-being:

“Having permission to transport an 11 year old girl meant that I was able to take her to her neurology appointments. Although this is still a “work in progress,” I can confidently say that my ability to transport her has led to an improved diagnostic and treatment process.”

- Prepared children for a future outside of the dependency system:

“I took him to get a driver’s license and to register to vote. I suspect neither would have occurred without my help.”

“Being able to transport my children has been instrumental in achieving the goal of getting the kids to attend a GED program, which was one of my top priorities in this case.”

“(I helped) the child prepare to age out and to lease and furnish his apartment.”

“(My) child purchased a headstone for his mom out of his allowance money. He did not want anyone else to do it for him. Once it was paid for, they installed it and I took him to see it. It was a very moving and emotional moment for him but it seemed to give him some closure. It was two years after her death.”

What follows are some of the many noteworthy recollections from GAL volunteers which illustrate the ways in which becoming a transporter has added new dimensions to their service.

“While in my home for Thanksgiving, we walked the dogs and played pool, football and ping pong. Later in the afternoon, the younger boy looked at his brother and said: ‘pinch me so that I know I am not dreaming.’”

“My 15 year old gave me his dream list of places he had always wanted to visit. He had never been to the zoo or to the science museum/planetarium. Each of our outings has been fun and memorable – and we still have plenty of items from the dream list we haven’t gotten to yet!”



“When one of the children wanted to speak to the Judge, she was without transportation so I offered. It was a 160-mile round trip and it gave the child, on the way to court, the opportunity to overcome her nervousness. She shared many experiences that brought her to the decision to ask the Judge to not make her return to her mother. On the return trip she was able to express her feelings about the experience. At that particular time, she did not feel comfortable discussing the situation with her foster parents.”

“I arranged a personal tour at a local TV station where we were able to sit in on the set of the evening news. My child had shown interest in becoming a meteorologist so, for his birthday, I arranged the visit.”

The 64 GAL volunteers interviewed were asked if they believed they had become better child advocates as a consequence of being able to transport. As indicated by the following representative quote, the GAL volunteers are convinced that becoming a transporter has been personally gratifying and has, indeed, improved their ability to become a stronger advocate for “their” child.

“I cannot measure the impact on the children but certainly know the impact these (transportation) experiences have had on me. Having the opportunity to participate in normal and stress free activities has definitely created a bond between us. When we fight battles for our beliefs we fight long and hard but when we fight battles for a child that we have gotten to know so personally, we fight at another level of our being. That time alone helps gain their trust; their openness helps me better understand them and what actions would be ‘in their best interest.’”



SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The 2012 law permitting Guardian ad Litem volunteers to transport is transforming the lives of dependent children and adding a new dimension to the role of a GAL volunteers. Increasingly, GALs are learning from their colleagues that the ability to transport is indispensable to their advocacy role and to their desire to bring normalcy to children currently in the dependency system.

An array of benefits has resulted from authorizing GAL volunteers to become transporters. Primary among these is that trust and more open communication have become central to the volunteer/child relationship. Additionally, GAL volunteers are now introducing their children to new experiences and “the world of possibilities.” Finally, GAL volunteers are creating opportunities to participate more fully in the lives of the children with whom they work and, consequently, are becoming better-informed “best interest” advocates.

The GAL volunteers are not the only ones to profit from this law change. The words of the children participating in the survey are convincing indicators of how much they have gained. They point to being reunited with siblings, having some time away from the group or foster home in which they live, eating out, going to a dance, shopping for new clothes, furnishing an apartment, planning for post-secondary education, or playing in a park as significant highlights in their life. The transportation option has given foster children more than just an opportunity to laugh, explore, learn, become involved, dream; it has given them normalcy and a volunteer partner with whom they can share time, discuss problems and, when needed, consider how best to cope.

Not unexpectedly, Guardian ad Litem volunteers do their utmost to ensure that the children with whom they work are provided with the safe environment, the support, the encouragement, the well-being, and the opportunities essential for a better life. The ability to transport has paved an additional pathway to accomplish these objectives. Not all children are eligible to be transported for a variety of reasons, and not all volunteers believe that becoming a transporter is suitable for them. However, as the voices of the volunteers and the dependent children are making evident, the ability to transport is an option that expands the ways in which we can bring more normalcy to the lives of these children and youth.



EXPRESSIONS OF THANKS AND APPRECIATION

GAL volunteers participating in this study speak for the entire Program when expressing their gratitude and thanks for the transportation option. These thanks are dedicated to everyone who worked to ensure the transportation option became a reality:

- “Being able to transport the children has opened up a whole new vista of opportunities to better understand what the children are experiencing.”
- “I didn’t think I would really find transporting this enriching but it has been a tremendous benefit to my children and to me personally.”
- “Transport is a true asset. It is one of the best tools for honest communication.”
- “Adding this opportunity is the best improvement in the GAL Program.”
- “I think it (transporting) gives us a very important tool in our arsenal with the end of increasing our problem solving alternatives and our ability to build rapport with the children.”
- “Being able to transport gives me the freedom to doing more for my child, getting to know her better and gaining her trust much faster. I am surprised at what a difference it makes.”
- “My being able to transport the children has greatly benefited both the children and me. I now consider the ability to transport the children a highly valuable privilege and an important tool in carrying out my GAL responsibilities.”
- “Thank you for the opportunity to transport my children. It has really been a big help in our relationships and given me more opportunity to be a mentor as well as a GAL to these children.”
- “Thank you for allowing us to transport our kids. It is often the only time we can get them to open up and it is very important in order to help them heal.
- “I hope that all the GALs apply to transport. They will be glad they did.”

“... the statewide guardian ad litem is an elegant combination of effectiveness and accountability, of individuals joining hands with government to give a voice to innocent kids who are suffering through no fault of their own.”

-- Mark Howard, Editor - *Florida Trend*, January 2013



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