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GUARDIAN AD LITEM ANNOUNCES 2018 AWARDS TO VOLUNTEERS, STAFF

[Tallahassee, Florida] – The Florida Guardian ad Litem (GAL) Program on Monday announced its annual awards to volunteers, staff and community supporters for outstanding service to abused, abandoned and neglected children.

The honorees come from all over the state – from the Children in Need Fund in the Panhandle to students at the University of Miami School of Law to a team of GAL staffers in Martin County who fought for a new home for children whose caregiver was dying.

The **Circuit Team Award** went to the 19th Judicial Circuit, whose volunteer advocates Mary and Ken Ward, Child Advocate Manager Laura Faber and Child's Best Interest Attorney Roberta Katz worked together on a challenging case. They advocated for two siblings who were sheltered with their grandfather due to their mother's substance abuse and their father's illness. The grandfather also was very ill. Roberta, the GAL attorney, helped the grandfather hire and direct a private attorney to pursue adoption by another relative. The team pushed for the children to leave the state to be with the relative and for a study of his home to be done. Meanwhile, Ken and Mary Ward stayed in touch with the grandfather, even walking his dog while he was in the hospital, and with the children, who were able to stay with their relative thanks to Katz's work in court. And when the grandfather died, in July, Roberta was able to tell him the adoption hearing was set for the next day.

"Through hard work, diligence, patience and collaboration, these two children have a permanent, loving home," said GAL Executive Director Alan Abramowitz.

The **Non-Profit of the Year Award** went to First Judicial Circuit Northwest Florida Guardian ad Litem Foundation, which started the Children in Need Fund in the Pensacola/Ft. Walton area. The Fund is on track to provide \$60,000 to children served by GAL this year. It also held its first "Sheriff's Challenge" golf tournament, which helped to develop partnerships with local law enforcement and create more fundraisers throughout the circuit. The Foundation also developed a successful public education

campaign, using local television and community leaders to recruit volunteers and boost awareness of the program, and funded a part-time Child Advocate Manager position to help with the circuit's increased workload.

"The NW Florida GAL Foundation's passion and commitment is making a difference every day in the lives of children," said Bryan Carter, director of the First Judicial Circuit GAL Program.

The **Community Advocate of the Year Award** went to Riana Maryanoff and Olga Hernandez of the University of Miami School of Law in Circuit 11. Maryanoff, a former GAL volunteer in Gainesville, is now a UM law student; she connected with Hernandez, a law school employee, thanks to their shared passion for helping children. They organized information sessions and on-site trainings so their fellow students could become certified as GAL volunteers. They also organized a panel for students on the dependency system, which included a judge, the chief of the U.S. Department of Justice Special Prosecutions Section, and members of the local GAL staff. Thanks to Riana and Olga for solidifying an important partnership with a key ally.

- **Audrey L. Schiebler Volunteer of the Year – Patti Reges, Circuit 18**

A GAL in Brevard County for 20 years, Patti Reges has committed time, money and heart to hundreds of children. This year, she volunteered to carry two difficult and emotionally demanding cases with medically needy children. One, an infant, had been shaken nearly to death; the other is disabled, with an intellectually disabled mother. Patti has spent long hours and intensely focused dedication to ensure these children had the best outcomes.

- **Executive Director Award – Jorge Tormes, Circuit 11**

Jorge Tormes exemplifies all-round leadership. His door is always open and he is quick to provide support to the legal team, Child Advocate Managers and volunteers. "Jorge has a great knack for seeing the big picture and finding outside-the-box resolutions to tough issues," said Circuit Director Jessica Allen. He is an invaluable resource to the recruitment and training team as well, sharing his knowledge of the special plight of LGBTQ youth in foster care with community members.

- **Leadership Award – Christine Meyer, Circuit 4**

After more than 20 years with the GAL Program, Christine Meyer has a reputation as a brilliant attorney and leader. A specialist in the administration of psychotropic medications, she was recently part of a statewide task force to revamp that portion of the Administrative Code. She is also the go-to resource for training her team on a multitude of subjects. Christine recently earned the prestigious Board Certification in Juvenile Law from The Florida Bar.

● **Judge Daniel P. Dawson Award – Andrea Bemenderfer, Circuit 19**

Andrea Bemenderfer, the assistant director in Circuit 19, has decades of service to GAL – including helping to found the program in Circuit 19. Most recently, she restructured a number of circuit operations and teams to increase representation in the four-county service area. She has also fostered and adopted her own children and recruited, trained and supported countless volunteers. Through her steady leadership, Andrea has helped to grow the circuit immensely.

● **Barbra Sessa Award – Zachary Lang, Circuit 4**

Zachary Lang won this year's Barbra Sessa Award for excellence in advocacy thanks to his history of working with troubled youth and families with mental health issues. He has an extraordinary ability to quickly build trust with his assigned children and effectively represent their best interests in court. He is always ready to help his coworkers and to train and motivate volunteers. Zachary is an outstanding example for his peers with his unwavering commitment to the children we serve.

● **Angela Orkin Award – Tammy Harris, Circuit 2**

Tammy Harris, a Child Advocate Manager II (CAM), is this year's winner of the Angela Orkin Dedication Award. As a supervisor to 11 CAM's, Tammy responds quickly to the needs of her employees even on her day off, and attends all the shelter hearings in Leon County to make sure our advocacy is effective and the children are supported. She always offers humor and support, and her team says she advocates for them with the same passion as for the children.

To learn more about the Guardian ad Litem Program or to become a volunteer, visit www.GuardianadLitem.org or call 1-866-341-1GAL.

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