



MARCH 2019



**GUARDIAN
AD LITEM
FOR CHILDREN**

NEWSLETTER

FEATURED

*How effective leadership
improves the outcomes
for our children.*

STAY INFORMED

*Six articles for YOU to
get updated with what's
happening Statewide!*

WHAT'S IN THE ISSUE

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A MESSAGE FROM EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR ALAN ABRAMOWITZ

LEADERSHIP IS NOT ABOUT DOING IT ALONE

I want you all to know how deeply proud I am of our staff and volunteers, who are leaders both within our Program and Florida's child welfare system. We have developed a culture of leadership that I can't praise highly enough.

Since our goal at Guardian ad Litem is to act in the best interests of the children we represent, we need the support of all our colleagues, inside and outside the Program, to achieve our vision and goals for every child.

That means our leaders must know their limits, including me.



“When we see our leaders behaving as if each child they represent were their own, it sets a standard that I see reflected throughout the Program.”

As you know, the Guardian ad Litem Program has a leadership team that I believe in – and who make my job much easier. They are experienced, dedicated and passionate about helping abused and neglected children. I trust their judgment, and they, in turn, trust the judgment of those they've chosen and empowered.

When we see our leaders behaving as if each child they represent were their own, it sets a standard that I see reflected throughout the Program. But it's also important to delegate, to ask for help, and to have confidence in the ability of staff and volunteers to step up to the plate.

So a crucial part of our mission is to know when our colleagues need our support.

Let's face it: most of us work long, difficult hours – and a kind word or a shared task can make all the difference. These exchanges also build the trust we can count on down the road, when we have principled reasons for a disagreement.

Leaders must focus on key responsibilities while giving colleagues the chance to develop their own leadership skills. That brings out the best in all of us – including the children we serve.

OPERATIONS

EFFECTIVE TEAMWORK

Leadership is about many things, but it is especially about relationships - how you form them and how you protect them. Lou Holtz, Hall of Fame College football coach, teaches that to build a relationship with anyone three questions must be answered: 1) *Can I trust you?* 2) *Do you care about me?* 3) *Are you committed to improving the relationship?*

Coach Holtz used an analogy to describe question 1 - building trust. Each time we do something positive the deposits are increased, and negative actions will result in withdrawals. When we look at our advocacy work for children, are we building relationships that will result in better outcomes or are they fraught with discord and conflict? Trusting someone doesn't mean we always agree, but it does mean that we believe trustworthiness is valuable.



“As with anything, we must build our relationships on strong foundations. We must believe in ourselves and nurture our relationships with others.”

Do we care about the relationship and keeping it healthy? Question 2 requires us to consider the needs of others over our own. Working in highly stressful environments like child welfare require that we practice empathy and courtesy, and engage in collaboration every day.

We must be willing to make commitments to maintain healthy relationships. Question 3 can be answered by understanding that what happens over time will determine how committed we are to the relationship. Work as child advocates can be costly to us personally and emotionally so we should be creating and nurturing relationships with others who share our commitment for excellent advocacy outcomes for children.

As with anything, we must build our relationships on strong foundations. We must believe in ourselves and nurture our relationships with others. We must make sure those who count on us know that we can be trusted and that we're committed to them and the success of the relationship.

Whenever you can help another person understand that you genuinely care about them, you open the door to connection, communication, and interaction.

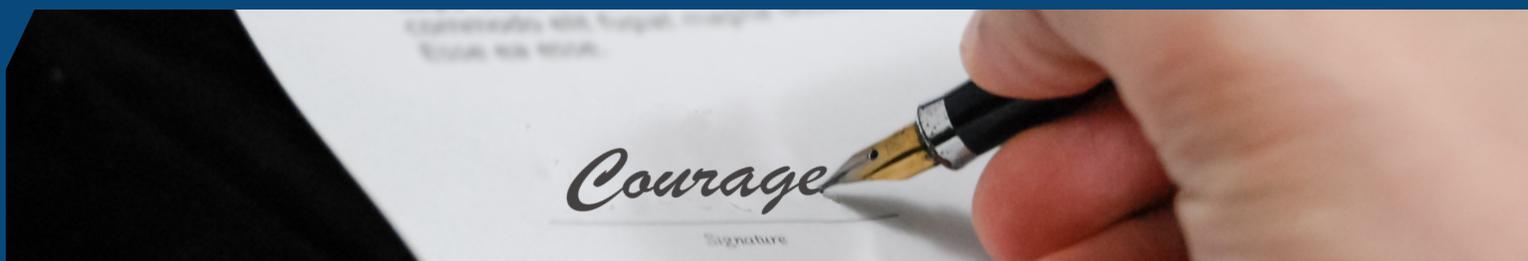
LEGAL

A SIGNATURE OF COURAGE

In the Fifth Circuit (Marion, Lake, Citrus, Hernando & Sumter Counties) and across the state, **courage** often looks like the guy who signs his name Ryan Johnson. Courage is the manner in which Fifth Circuit (senior child's best interest attorney Ryan Johnson practices law.

Courage is Ryan, calmly but firmly, keeping his word. Ryan currently represents 195 children in Marion County. One might think a case load such as that would have a chilling effect on Ryan's willingness to file motions or pleadings. If you think so, you would be wrong.

Courage is Ryan and the way he advocates for the children. When Ryan Johnson says he is going to file a pleading in a case...he keeps his word. And Ryan Johnson files plenty of pleadings. Last year Ryan filed (and prosecuted) five TPR (Termination of Parental Rights) Petitions, helped others draft three more, and filed and prosecuted countless motions. His numbers for this year are looking pretty good too.



In an egregious abuse - shelter case Ryan pro-actively took the lead, and timely filed the TPR petition. In anticipation of the trial, he reviewed hundreds of pages of medical records, secured medical witnesses, took the mother's deposition, and met with the CAM (Child Advocacy Manager) regularly to discuss the multiple medical issues.

Recently, in another case, he set a hearing to challenge a suitability assessment. He was then able to professionally demonstrate that the assessor did not have all of the necessary information to make the correct decision. As a result he was successful in getting the court to order the proper treatment and level of care for the child.

In yet another case Ryan filed an expedited TPR when DCF (Department of Children and Families) / CLS (Children's Legal Services) had decided not to, although the mother had four prior dependency cases - one resulting in TPR - and a total of five child removals - all due to substance abuse. He met with the child witnesses (boys), took them to the courthouse and made them comfortable with the process of testifying - which they did so beautifully, in the presence of their mother. TPR was achieved and the boys can now remain where they are and not have to worry about being shuffled in and out of foster care.

You might think an attorney who handles his cases in such a forceful manner would be a bit of a showman. Not so with Ryan. In fact, he has the reputation of not being a showman. He simply argues the facts and law. No hyperbole. No shouting. No grandstanding. He, therefore, is well liked and respected by CLS, parent's attorneys, and the judiciary. Those he works with says not only is he professional but he is awesome!

To all of us here at the Guardian ad Litem Program - Ryan Johnson just seems to be courageous.

EMPOWERING OUR YOUTH – IT TAKES A VILLAGE

For most young adults, typically turning 18 or 21 means newfound independence. Whether you're going off to college or having your first legal drink, most youth eagerly await these milestone birthdays. But for the more than 900 young adults in Florida's foster care system turning 18 or 21 is far from being a celebratory event.

The foster care system was designed to temporarily protect and nurture children whose parents are unable or unwilling to care for them. Sadly enough too many kids end up growing-up in the foster care system.

These young people have experienced maltreatment and lived with instability. So it will probably come as no surprise that they are often ill prepared to suddenly live independently and figure out on their own how to do what the foster care system was set up to do for them - feed, clothe and house them.



Aging out of foster care without a permanent home is the highest-risk outcome for a foster youth. What we have learned over the years is that the key to their success has to do with ensuring that they have at least one committed and caring adult in their lives.

As part of the Guardian ad Litem Team, you will continue to serve in your role following the same standards and practices you learned regarding advocating for the best interest of the child. However, the volunteer advocate role in working with an older youth naturally shifts from Advocate to Mentor.

Advocating involves learning the youth's needs and wishes and serving as a voice for their best interest. Mentoring involves developing a personal relationship with a youth, being a buddy and serving as a role model. Working with youth aging out of foster care is very specialized. The needs of this very vulnerable population are very specific. We need to continuously arm our volunteers with the necessary tools that they need in order to advocate on behalf of their youth.

So often when we are working with this population we forget about the big picture because we often find ourselves dealing with an immediate crisis. As leaders we need to ensure that we are constantly reminding our staff and volunteers to plan with our youth and together envision their future. These are some of the topics that we should constantly be reminding our staff and volunteers to cover when it comes to working with foster youth.

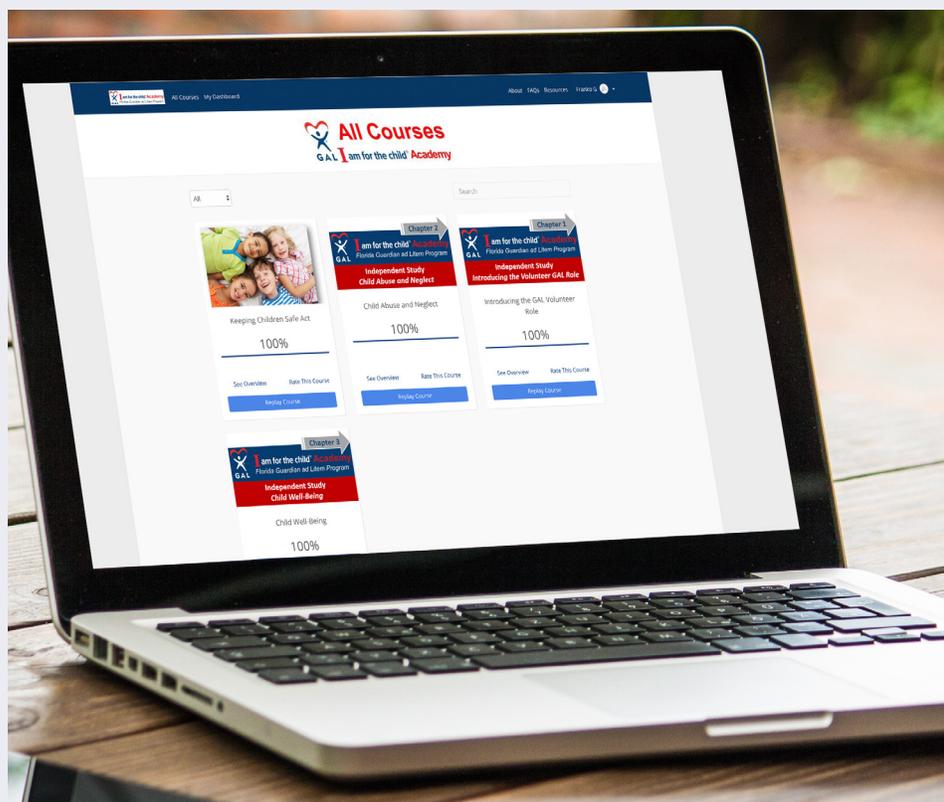
- Independent Living Skills – Teens leave foster care with the skills needed to live independently.
- Support System – Teens will have a network of caring adults when they leave foster care.
- Education – Teens leave foster care with a realistic plan for receiving a high school diploma or equivalent and a realistic and achievable plan for post-secondary training or education.
- Vocational/Employment Skills – Teens leave foster care with a realistic and achievable career plan.
- Housing – Teens will have a place to live when they leave foster care.
- Physical/Behavioral Health – Teens will know how to access their medical insurance and contact their medical provider.

It is our job to ensure that we are helping the youth create webs of support and interdependency that will increase their success as they transition to adulthood.

TRAINING: THE “I AM FOR THE CHILD ACADEMY” A TOOL FOR LEARNING AND EMPOWERMENT

Successful people tend to always want to continue learning. They want to learn and discover new and challenging information to feed their curiosity. In 2014, researchers from the University of California found that our brains like curiosity. They also found that curiosity puts the brain in a state that allows it to learn and retain any kind of information.

As we work with and engage our volunteer child advocates, it is our task to encourage their curiosity and to awaken their desire to learn and grow. The “I am for the Child Academy” has been created as a tool for learning and empowerment. It offers an excellent opportunity for staff and volunteers to easily complete their annual in-service hours’ requirement. It is much more than a new way to provide pre-service training! All of the courses, recorded webinars and conference calls exist to “feed our brains” with ideas and knowledge that can lead to powerful and successful advocacy.



“As we work with and engage our volunteer child advocates, it is our task to encourage their curiosity and to awaken their desire to learn and grow.”

Is one of your volunteer child advocates struggling with how to be heard at an Individual Education Plan (IEP) meeting for their child? Does one of your volunteers have numerous questions about psychotropic medications? Their concerns and questions can be thoroughly answered and addressed by accessing the Academy. They can attend the IEP meeting armed and empowered with knowledge to be a strong voice for their child.

For the Academy to be successful, it must be used. Make using it and sharing it with your volunteer child advocates a priority. As we learn and grow together, we become more confident and courageous with the advocacy we provide.

REGIONAL UPDATE: NORTH, CENTRAL, AND SOUTH REGIONS

THE TRIUMPH AWARD

The Triumph Award recognizes an exceptional young person involved with the Guardian ad Litem Program who has overcome incredible odds. The Guardian ad Litem Foundation is taking the opportunity to honor youth who are high achievers and have aspirations to help the community.

All twenty Guardian ad Litem Judicial Circuits had the opportunity to nominate their most deserving youth who demonstrate determination, resiliency, and motivation.

Eighteen applications were received from circuits around the state. Each of these applicants will receive \$100 and a letter from Executive Director, Alan Abramowitz, recognizing them for their achievements. Three finalists were selected who will attend the finalist competition in Tallahassee.

A panel of distinguished leaders will interview the three finalists and select the winner who will be announced on April 10th in Tallahassee.



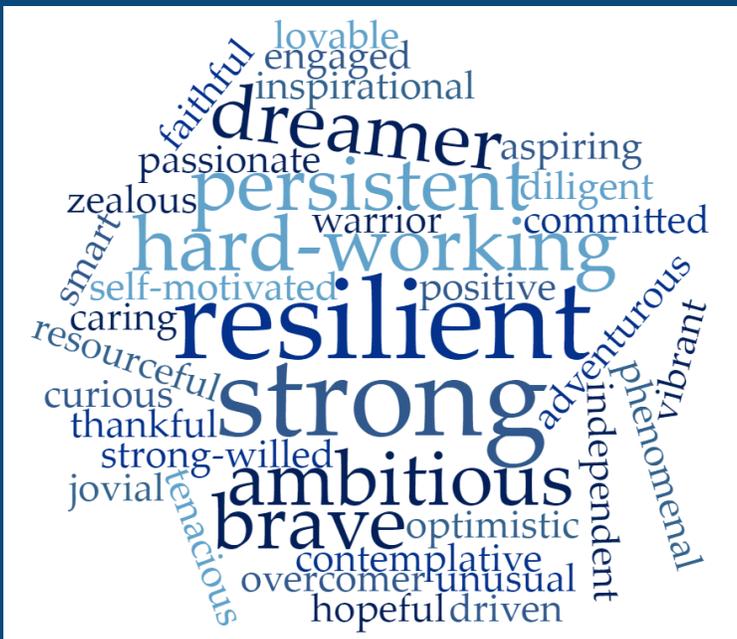
Each finalist will receive a laptop to help further their educational success. In addition, the winner will receive a \$5,000 academic scholarship, the 1st runner-up will receive a \$3,000 scholarship and the 2nd runner-up will receive a \$2,000 scholarship.

In the applications, the youth had to write three essays. Many of the applicants wrote about the impact of the Guardian ad Litem Program on their lives. Robert stated, "I used my situation to propel myself towards a better future, but I did not do it alone." Isaac said, "I believe my Guardian (ad Litem Volunteer Child Advocate) always has my best interests in mind. When we discuss issues that I am facing, I can always count on his perspective and advice".

Even when we think our youth are not listening to us, Patricia shows us otherwise, saying, "The (Guardian ad Litem) Program is a great thing for kids, especially my age, because we need a role model to influence us in a positive way." Katrina stated, "The Guardian ad Litem Program has made a difference in my life by showing me, I'm not the only one fighting for me." *(CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE)*

The youth were surprisingly philosophical, like Angela who wrote, “You never know what a person is facing or has faced, so why not just aim to leave every person in a better place than when you met them?” Jasmyne showed insight beyond her years when she said, “It seemed to me, that a recurring obstacle in my life rested on a choice between allowing my circumstances to define me and fighting for success even in the darkest of places.”

Ariel displayed a positive attitude when she wrote, “Right now, I am just a number in the system, another statistic, but my dreams are big and they will be fulfilled. Today, I am another unfortunate child who has experienced abuse, but in 10 years I will be making a difference in other’s lives.” And Natalia wrote, “My biggest motto now is: If it matters you will make it happen.”



*Pictured Left:
A “Word Cloud” created
from an essay question
TRIUMPH Youth answered:
What are three words that
describe yourself?*

Some of them were very insightful, like Sarah, “The most difficult obstacle I have overcome was gaining my motivation back.” Perhaps Christine summed up what they are all thinking when she said, “I believe I can do anything I put my mind to.”

When the applicants were asked where they saw themselves in 5 or 10 years, nearly all of the applicants wish to pursue higher education, and almost all mentioned giving back to the community in some way. Ja’La would like to “be the poster child for Guardian ad Litem”. She wants to be a pediatric nurse and manage her money wisely so that she is wealthy and can own a car and a home.

Ja’La also wants to help her family; have her younger siblings reside with her and help her mother and father get back on their feet when they get out of prison. She wishes to marry, have a child and a dog and adopt a child from the system.

Blessing is also interested in being a pediatric or neonatal nurse and also mentioned counseling and literature. She’s also considering getting married and starting a family and would like to live in North Georgia or Tennessee near mountains. (CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE)

Rayla wants to work as a nurse in a health care setting and use her leadership skills. She aspires to start a stable family and be a terrific mom and wishes to give back to the community by being a Guardian ad Litem and talking to at-risk youth about how she was able to graduate high school in three years.

Lillian wants to get a Master's in nursing and become a nurse anesthetist in a hospital setting. She also wants to be happily married with kids and two big dogs and to speak on behalf of Guardian ad Litem and foster care to potential adoption seekers.

Sarah is undecided about her career path, but is interested in being a Physician's Assistant, pursuing a law degree, or a degree in architecture or real estate. She would like to live independently, become a Guardian ad Litem and give back to the community.

Lily aspires to be a neuroscientist who helps soldiers come back to their families without any permanent injuries such as paralysis and she would like to find a cure for brain diseases such as Multiple Sclerosis. Melanie wants to get her Master's degree in Psychology and become a mental health therapist. She would like to save money, buy a home, get married and help kids with similar problems as she had, as well as helping her siblings.

Kevin would like to create a small animation company and have a small home and pay off his car. In the future, he would like to be the owner of several rental homes, have a house on a lake, own a Lamborghini, become a Guardian ad Litem or foster parent and help kids who are in the same situation he was once in.

Everyone who has participated in the Triumph award selection process has been inspired and humbled by the applications that were submitted. Fifth Circuit Director Marcia Hilty stated, "This award exemplifies what the Guardian ad Litem Program stands for. It extends well beyond its monetary value. It's a gesture that recognizes an abused child's academic accomplishments and despite unimaginable hardships, faith in the achievement of a better tomorrow."

Good luck to the finalists: Jasmyne Prophet (Circuit 5: Marion, Lake, Citrus, Hernando & Sumter Counties), Robert Hurley (Circuit 6: Pinellas & Pasco Counties) and Angela Dawkins (Circuit 10: Polk, Sebring/Highlands & Wauchula/Hardee Counties *with* Circuit 15: Palm Beach County).

