



APRIL 2019



**GUARDIAN  
AD LITEM**  

---

**FOR CHILDREN**

# NEWSLETTER

## FEATURED

***TRIUMPH AWARDS  
FINALISTS  
&  
2019 REGIONAL AWARDS!***

## STAY INFORMED

*Read and get updated  
with what's happening  
Statewide!*

## WHAT'S IN THE ISSUE

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A MESSAGE FROM EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR ALAN ABRAMOWITZ  
**BASICS SET THE TONE FOR LEADERSHIP**

The staff and Volunteer Child Advocates of Florida's Guardian ad Litem Program are passionate about representing the very best interests of the children we serve. That means being effective on a lot of levels.

It means doing the basics well – such as visiting children and their parents, siblings, caregivers, teachers and health professionals; knowing the service providers in your area and advocating to them about needed services for children; and documenting these efforts meticulously. It means keeping the case moving forward so that no child languishes in foster care.



*“ Basics Set the Tone for Guardian ad Litem Program’s Leadership Role... These basics of advocacy are the bricks and mortar of every child’s case. They are the example we hope to set for every child in our Program – that of a trustworthy, responsible adult who cares enough to get it right.”*

It means being someone the child can trust, always keeping our word, keeping the child informed and included, and faithfully representing his or her wishes.

It means being someone the judge can trust to do all these things, to know the child’s best interests thoroughly, and to give the judge the tools to make the best possible decisions.

It means being someone your colleagues can trust to help them represent a vulnerable child – always searching for the best possible outcome. Sometimes a good outcome comes about due to someone’s record-keeping or extra visit to a child or provider. It boosts us all when we can count on our colleagues, and vice versa.

These basics of advocacy are the bricks and mortar of every child’s case. They are the example we hope to set for every child in our Program – that of a trustworthy, responsible adult who cares enough to get it right.

These basics are why the Florida Guardian ad Litem Program has a leadership role in our child welfare system. We change lives.

## OPERATIONS

# MAKING SURE THE NEEDS OF CHILDREN ARE BEING MET

Much of our focus for 2019 will be centered on strengthening our advocacy and gaining a better understanding of our duties and responsibilities as they relate to the children we represent. Recently, our State-wide Leadership team conducted a webinar entitled **Party Status: How it Empowers and Obligates Us to Act**. As the title suggests, not only should we feel empowered to act on behalf of the children we represent, we have a duty and obligation to do so.

This training material reinforces that we are obligated by statute and our standards to initiate any action necessary to ensure that each child's needs are being met. Think about what that means, why it matters, and how it can be accomplished.



*“You may never know what results come of your actions, but if you do nothing, there will be no results.”  
- Mahatma Gandhi*

Commitment, Communication, Empowerment, Collaboration, and Courtesy – many of us have these five Core Values hanging on our office walls, attached to our emails, and they have become part of our everyday lives as child advocates.

But, have you measured your work for children against these Core Values? Are you committed to excellent advocacy? Are you empowered when you meet with the advocacy team? Are you open to collaborating with others, including other agencies?

One rule in providing excellent advocacy for children is never accepting NO as an answer. Ask instead how we can accomplish what needs to be done – thereby utilizing empowerment as a tool of action. Our role in Child Welfare is complex and sobering. Together we can make sure the needs of children are front and center through our actions. Doing nothing cannot be an option – the cost is simply too great.

If you have not yet participated in the above-referenced webinar please click here:

[Party Status: How it Empowers and Obligates Us to Act](https://florida-guardian-ad-litem-program.thinkific.com/courses/Party-Status)  
[\[florida-guardian-ad-litem-program.thinkific.com/courses/Party-Status\]](https://florida-guardian-ad-litem-program.thinkific.com/courses/Party-Status)

# CHILD ADVOCATE TEAMS

Our mission of achieving best interest outcomes for children is accomplished day in and day out throughout the State by teams of child advocates. We liken our approach to a three-legged stool made up of a Volunteer Child Advocate, a Child Advocate Manager and a Best Interest Attorney. The Volunteer Child Advocate is the expert on the facts of the case. The Child Advocate Manager is the expert in child welfare. The Best Interest Attorney. is the expert in the law. Each leg of the stool is critical in order for it to remain stable and effective.

Each member of the team relies on each other member of the team. The team develops a strategy and action plan for each case, based on whatever is in the child's best interest. Each member of the team has a role in implementing the strategy and action plan.



*“Each member of the team relies on each other member of the team. The team develops a strategy and action plan for each case, based on whatever is in the child’s best interest.”*

The Best Interest Attorney., for example, will develop a legal strategy but he or she is unable to do anything with it without the information (evidence) and expertise (social work experience) provided by the Volunteer Child Advocate and Child Advocate Manager. The Volunteer Child Advocate or Child Advocate Manager will help develop an action plan that requires an order from the court but he/she needs the expertise of the attorney to be able to successfully support the request for relief in the form of a motion or petition.

Each member of the team is responsible for getting the team to “yes” for the sake of each child. The Volunteer Child Advocate and Child Advocate Manager are responsible for gathering information and getting the case into a posture where we can successfully litigate when needed. If there are barriers to getting to “yes,” the Best Interest Attorney. is responsible for counseling and advising the Volunteer Child Advocate and Child Advocate Manager on what information is needed and what actions need to be taken in order to overcome the barriers and achieve the desired result.

Each team member should take the lead in advocating for the course of action he/she believes is appropriate. Each team member comes from a different area of strength or expertise. His or her opinion should be respected and considered. Spirited debate and respectful disagreement lead to better outcomes for our children. Our teams can only function in an environment of mutual respect and trust.

## STATEWIDE FOUNDATION

# MORE TRAINING = BETTER ADVOCATES

One of the most effective ways that volunteer advocacy can be improved is through increased training opportunities for our Guardian ad Litem Volunteer Child Advocates. By giving our Volunteer Child Advocates the most relevant training on issues that are impacting the child they are advocating for, the more productive they will become. Increased knowledge will lead to an increased ability to advocate more effectively. As Benjamin Franklin once stated, “An investment in knowledge always pays the best interest.”

The Florida Guardian ad Litem Foundation is pleased to have developed a strong relationship with Sunshine Health that allows us to offer Volunteer Child Advocate training grants for those circuits that have a desire to offer additional Volunteer Child Advocate training opportunities. Last year the eight training events attracted over 600 Guardian ad Litem Volunteer Child Advocates. For 2019 we have selected eight circuits who will be offering a wide range of topics to their Volunteer Child Advocates.



*“The Florida Guardian ad Litem Foundation is pleased to have developed a strong relationship with Sunshine Health that allows us to offer Volunteer Child Advocate training grants for those circuits that have a desire to offer additional volunteer training opportunities.”*

The Florida Guardian ad Litem Foundation was also able to offer two Fostering Futures trainings in Jacksonville in 2018 as well as providing the resources to allow six Guardian ad Litem staff members to become part of the training team. Additionally, a joint project with the State Office allowed us to assist with a Train the Trainer program that was conducted by Florida State University at four locations across the state.

Our Guardian ad Litem Volunteer Child Advocates are amazing advocates for our children and it is crucial that we give them every advantage possible to serve these young people to the best of their ability. With increased training opportunities our Volunteer Child Advocates will take their role of advocating for the children to a new level.

The Florida Guardian ad Litem Foundation’s mission is to provide additional resources for the Guardian ad Litem Program, its Volunteer Child Advocates, and its affiliated circuit non-profit organizations in order to promote Guardian ad Litem representation for abused, abandoned and neglected children in Florida’s dependency system. Please do not hesitate to reach out at any time that the Florida Guardian ad Litem Foundation may be able to assist you, your volunteers, or the young people you serve.

## SOCIAL ADVOCACY AND INCLUSION **FROM BOLTED-ON TO BUILT-IN**

Written by Calvin Martin, Director of Social Advocacy and Inclusion

There are a number of organizations and businesses that work to support children. For example, businesses regularly give money to worthy causes or create social responsibility plans in the optimism that this will attract their stakeholders.

While strategies such as these are only loosely coupled to the strategy of the business, they seem to be “bolted on” rather than “built in.” Therefore, they are likely to foster a standing that’s more inconsistent with the main actions of the business and less credible.



*“While strategies such as these are only loosely coupled to the strategy of the business, they seem to be “bolted on” rather than “built in.”*”

Our Program’s mission is advocacy for children involved in the dependency court system who are victims of abuse and neglect. This means advocacy for things to which the law says the child is entitled, such as a permanent home within a year and working to ensure child-centered decisions are made by having a thorough understanding of the facts and the child. Because of this, our standing is grounded to an approach that is built into the very fabric of our Program.

As I meet with circuit leadership, I plan to review local level data-metrics from a number of sources including the circuit’s own marketing plan. This will assist us in developing strategies to help the circuit with targeted recruitment; specifically, faith-based and communities of color, training and retention of current Volunteer Child Advocates - in addition with recruiting more males, and community engagement efforts.

Lastly, I plan to set up an inclusion committee of circuit representatives who will actively contribute to the design and delivery of this initiative, which will foster cultural sensitivity, diversity and inclusion for our Volunteer Child Advocates and staff. These circuit appointed staff liaisons will be selected by circuit leadership based on their interest within the spectrum of diversity, inclusion, cultural competence and poverty.

With this approach, I believe that we have a built in road-map to improve outcomes for children and their families. By embedding diversity and inclusion into our policies, practices and efforts, we will no longer use “nuts and bolts” to enhance our child advocacy but find stronger, more permanent solutions to ensure each child’s safety, timely permanency and well-being.

# **THE TRIUMPH AWARD - THE FINALISTS**

We are excited as we move to the next phase of the Triumph Award process! The three finalists have now been selected from among the eighteen excellent applicants. They are Angela Dawkins (submitted by C10 with Court jurisdiction from C15), Robert Hurley (Circuit 6) and Jasmyne Prophet (Circuit 5)!

These amazing youths will be heading to Tallahassee for the final phase of the selection process, consisting of an interview by a panel of distinguished leaders. 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 \$2,500 scholarship and the 2nd runner-up will receive a \$1,000 scholarship.



*Angela Dawkins*  
**TRIUMPH AWARD FINALIST**

*“Believes: You should aim to leave every person in a better place than they were when you met them.”*

The winner will be announced April 10, 2019. We wish each of these youth the best and much success in their journey ahead! Here is a brief introduction of each of our finalists:

## **Angela Dawkins**

Angela is an aspiring young woman whose goal is to inspire all that she comes in contact with. She plans to develop and expand her inspirational speaking business called “Aspiring to Inspire by Angii” as she believes you should aim to leave every person in a better place than they were when you met them. Her goals include writing and publishing her own biography, creating short inspirational videos to use on public media and participate in motivational speaking opportunities.

She has had the opportunity to work with two Guardians ad Litem (Cathy Iho from Circuit 15 and Kathy Ammon from Circuit 10) who have helped her realize this dream as they have encouraged her to use the circumstances of her life to help and inspire others. Kathy Ammon calls her poetry raw, honest and powerful and has often times received motivational text messages to start her day from Angela.

## STATEWIDE REGIONAL UPDATE

# THE TRIUMPH AWARD

In addition to inspiring others to achieve their dreams and reach their full potential, Angela is ambitious in her own goals of graduating undergraduate and graduate school in the next 10 years and one day would like to be a foster parent and adopt children from the dependency system. She has been recognized by her teachers as a leader and is a Sigma Alpha Sigma mentor in which she tutors other students who are academically struggling.

She is also a football team manager at her high school, works at Taco Bell and finds opportunities to give back to the homeless by volunteering. She has a vibrant personality as her teacher calls her, a force to be reckoned with.



*Robert Hurley*  
*TRIUMPH AWARD FINALIST*

*“His main goal in life is to -  
Aspire for greatness  
in all that I do.”*

### **Robert Hurley**

How many teenagers do you know who are brilliant mathematicians and gifted in writing? As likely to be working with robotics as he would be playing guitar or performing on stage in a musical? Robert Hurley may have come from difficult upbringings but his future is certainly bright. He is the nomination from the 6th Circuit, from St. Petersburg in Pinellas County. Robert’s Volunteer Child Advocate, Gene Goldberg, has known Robert for eight years, and thinks of him as part of the family.

Robert is on track to be the 2019 Valedictorian at Boca Ciega High School, is a member of several national honor societies and is a two year member, and this year’s captain of the Academic Team. He has achieved a 4.6 grade point average and is taking A.P. classes. He will graduate with over 50 college credits while participating in high school competitive sports, many clubs and performing in plays and musicals.

Robert wishes to be accepted in an Ivy League School and would like to pursue medicine and specialize in neuroscience, while still enjoying guitar and local theater along the way. Robert describes himself as unusual, positive and curious. His main goal in life is to “aspire for greatness in all that I do”. Robert’s Volunteer Child Advocate, Gene, describes him as “likable and modest, intelligent and hardworking”.

*Article Continued on Next Page*

## STATEWIDE REGIONAL UPDATE

# THE TRIUMPH AWARD

### Jasmyne Prophet

Jasmyne is the nomination from the 5th Circuit, from Brooksville in Hernando County. She is such an amazing young lady. The three words Jasmyne used to describe herself were jovial, ambitious and strong. She certainly embodies these positive qualities.

Jasmyne says “Even when life is bleak, I always find a way to be happy” She has demonstrated unwavering commitment and personal initiative to pursue her educational goals. Coming into the dependency system in her senior high school year, she enrolled herself without parental assistance. She immediately went on to dual enrollment classes.

Jasmyne has now graduated and is attending New College of Florida in Sarasota. She was also the source of strength, comfort and support to her three younger siblings. Even at her young age, she has displayed much compassion and a giving spirit through her volunteerism with organizations such as, All Faiths Food Bank, Turning Points Homeless Organization and the 2018 Youth Genealogy Project.

As her Guardian ad Litem says, “She is a warm, caring person who has very strong values and tremendous aptitude and perseverance to succeed.”



*Jasmyne Prophet*  
*TRIUMPH AWARD FINALIST*

*“Even when life is bleak,  
I always find a way  
to be happy.”*

The youth being celebrated via the Triumph Awards all have one thing in common: a Guardian ad Litem advocacy team. It is because of the amazing efforts of our staff and Volunteer Child Advocates that our youth have the support systems and opportunities to be successful and flourish like Angela, Robert and Jasmyne did.

This year’s annual awards for our staff and Volunteer Child Advocates includes six categories: Volunteer of the Year; Community Advocate of the Year; Non Profit of the Year/ Best Interest Attorney of the Year- Judge Dawson Award; Child Advocate Manager of the Year- Barbra Sessa Award; and the Operational Support Staff of the Year- Angela Orkin Award.

*Article Continued on Next Page*

# **THE GUARDIAN AD LITEM 2019 REGIONAL AWARDS**

This year we had a three tier process with individuals being recognized at the Circuit, Regional and State level. Award winners for these awards have been selected at the Circuit and Regional levels and we are anxiously awaiting the announcement of the statewide level winners in early April!

It is so inspiring to hear the extraordinary accomplishments and achievements being made around the state from our staff, Volunteer Child Advocates and community partners. It's also humbling and an honor to work alongside such dedicated and committed men and women. Thank you all for everything you do each and every day!

**Join us in congratulating all of our 2019 Regional Award Winners!**

## **Northern Region**

Community Advocate of the Year: 1st Circuit -  
Virginia "Ginger" Davis & A Bed for Me Foundation  
Best Interest Attorney of the Year: 7th Circuit - Jenna Wickenhauser  
Non-Profit of the Year: 8th Circuit - The Guardian Foundation, Inc.  
Operational Support Staff of the Year: 7th Circuit - Anna Vega  
Child Advocate Manager of the Year: 14th Circuit - Erin Kennedy  
Volunteer of the Year: 5th Circuit - Valerie Faggart

## **Central Region**

Community Advocate of the Year: 6th Circuit - Judge Lynn Tepper  
Best Interest Attorney of the Year: 20th Circuit - Carol Mitchell  
Non-Profit of the Year: 13th Circuit - Voices for Children of Tampa Bay, Inc.  
Ronna Kennedy, Executive Director  
Operational Support Staff of the Year: 12th Circuit - Alice Hackett  
Child Advocate Manager of the Year: 18th Circuit - Laura Ramos  
Volunteer of the Year: 10th Circuit - Dr. Jeffrey Schwartz

## **Southern Region**

Community Advocate of the Year: 11th Circuit - Educate Tomorrow  
Best Interest Attorney of the Year: 15th Circuit - Christian Pietka  
Non-Profit of the Year: 19th Circuit - Voices for Children  
of Okeechobee and the Treasure Coast  
Operational Support Staff of the Year: 17th Circuit - Deena Greene  
Child Advocate Manager of the Year: 16th Circuit - Sandi Webb  
Volunteer of the Year: 15th Circuit - Lisa Chassey



**GUARDIAN AD LITEM**  
**FOR CHILDREN**