



OCTOBER 2019



**GUARDIAN
AD LITEM**

FOR CHILDREN

NEWSLETTER

FEATURED

Guardian ad Litem Program's
"Leadership in the Face of Adversity"
&
Program Regional Resiliency

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Statewide!

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A MESSAGE FROM EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR ALAN ABRAMOWITZ

LEADERSHIP IN THE FACE OF ADVERSITY BUILDS OUR RESILIENCE

“You have set yourself a difficult task, but you will succeed if you persevere; and you will find a joy in overcoming obstacles.” – Helen Keller

If we learn one thing as advocates, it's that progress doesn't come easy. It takes persistence, often over years. It takes belief in our cause and our colleagues. And it takes planning for the setbacks we inevitably face on the road to success.

Above all, for the Guardian ad Litem Program, it takes listening to the children we serve, helping them build resilience, and finding ways to empower them in the courts, the child welfare system, and in life.



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And we know that adversity in the community has inspired support for our mission to see that every child has a safe, loving and permanent home.

Last month I wrote about Florida's record of legislative success on behalf of abused, abandoned and neglected children. None of it came easy – certainly not to the children and families for whom we fought. But as you know, we plan ahead for these actions, and a big part of that is educating our staff, volunteers and other supporters on the issues.

Being a small fish in a large pond is often how it feels when you are seeking to help children at the state level. Fortunately, our most civic-minded citizens tend not only to volunteer as Guardians ad Litem – they also take steps to ensure that policy makers understand the issues. These efforts are a win-win-win: we amplify children's voices and show them we're listening; we encourage conversation between advocates and child welfare professionals; and we show state and local government officials that Floridians care deeply about the safety and well-being of our children.

Many of these conversations are painful, because they recount the traumatic experiences of vulnerable children. They also come at a cost to our staff and volunteers, and to anyone else with a heart who hears the details. That is often what it takes to get new policies and the dollars to pursue them.

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A MESSAGE FROM EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR ALAN ABRAMOWITZ LEADERSHIP IN THE FACE OF ADVERSITY BUILDS OUR RESILIENCE

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But more to the point, there is no shortcut through adversity; it must be faced for healing to begin. That is why our Program has embraced trauma-informed care, and it is why our staff and volunteers persevere on behalf of children in their communities and courts against sometimes overwhelming odds.

By fighting for kids, we are recognized statewide as steadfast advocates for children. As the Guardian ad Litem Program's 40th anniversary approaches, it is obvious that the adversity in these children's lives has led policy makers to support them – and us. The Governor's Blue Ribbon Task Force concluded that "if there is any program that costs the least and benefits the most, this one is it," calling Guardian ad Litem the "indispensable intermediary between the child and the court, between the child and [the Department of Children and Families.]"

We are inspired by the children we serve. Let your inspiration shine!

PROGRAM OPERATIONS UPDATE WISHFUL THINKING

Tomorrow belongs to people who prepare for it today - African Proverb.

As child advocates, this proverb certainly rings true. Planning ahead is the only viable way to get the children we represent to permanency timely. Last minute efforts to change the case plan tasks or goal in order to attain the best interests of children are not usually successful. In order to convince the Court to make those changes, we have to be prepared.



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As we travel around the state, we commonly see a lot of good intention surrounding the efforts to help children find their way home, but sometimes there is no clear plan of how to get them there. Every juncture of a dependency case involves a great deal of planning—from shelter to reunification, or placement to adoption. Our obligation to the children we represent is to do everything within our power to advocate for the best interest of children, but are we planning or reacting? Sometimes the right thing to do for the children is easy to discern, many times it is not. We must plan ahead to ensure we are heading in the right direction, and those plans involve a lot of effort and teamwork.

Over the next several months you will notice a concerted effort to encourage team work and team staffings. Utilizing our team approach to advocate for children is effective, especially when all of the team members are involved in the discussion and planning. Are we taking advantage of the experience and skills of our other team members, or of our leadership? Some have said that a goal without a plan is just a wish....and wishing alone won't get the children to the life they deserve. But heartfelt child advocacy and a good plan will.

LEGAL STRATEGY AND PLANNING AHEAD

The most important strategy for an attorney to employ is to prepare, prepare, prepare. It is absolutely critical that the entire advocacy team is prepared for every hearing and staffing on every case. It is equally important that the attorney ensure that the Volunteer Child Advocate (VCA), Child Advocate Manager (CAM) and any witness they intend to call is prepared for every hearing.

Preparation begins with having a command of the facts of the case, the law and the rules governing the proceeding. The VCA and CAM are the experts in the facts of the case and the attorney is the expert in the law and rules. The strategy in any given case has a cyclical development. The VCA, with direction from the CAM, develops the facts of the case and a plan of action or strategy.

The attorney has the knowledge of how to implement the strategy legally. The attorney cannot execute a legal strategy without having the information that the VCA has; and the VCA cannot achieve the desired outcome for the child without the legal advocacy of the attorney. For example, the VCA determines that a child should be reunified with her parents but the Dependency Case Manager (DCM) doesn't agree. The VCA and CAM meet with the attorney to discuss the strategy for getting the child back home.



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The attorney determines that the facts at our disposal do not yet meet the legal criteria to support a motion for reunification. The attorney provides direction as to what additional facts are needed to “get to yes” or in this case, to support a motion to reunify. The VCA gathers the additional information, the team meets again as often as needed and the attorney ultimately files the motion for reunification.

The attorney will work with the VCA to prepare him or her for direct and cross examination at the hearing on the motion. The preparation will shine a light on any possible weaknesses in the facts or testimony as well as ensure that the attorney has all the facts that the VCA has and that are necessary to support our “ask” in court. The attorney also needs to anticipate any potential defenses and be able to refute them.

There is no such thing as being over-prepared and no substitution for preparation.

Resilience is that ineffable quality that allows some people to be knocked down by life and come back at least as strong as before.

The one year anniversary of Hurricane Michael is soon approaching. The Cat 5 historic storm made landfall in the panhandle of Florida in the Panama City area and the surrounding counties on October 10th 2018.



“In the 14th circuit volunteers and staff have also shown that resiliency as they continue to advocate for kids even though many are still putting their home back together, living in a camper or have blue tarps on their homes.”

As the Miami Herald reported on June 13, 2019, “the devastation and the slow pace of recovery are instilling a sense of despair among many of the region’s residents who are still struggling to find housing or fulfill basic needs. Many are living in tents or campers outside ruined homes while they wait for contractors or for state or federal assistance. The strain is starting to show among many of the Panhandle’s children, as school officials in Bay County are fearing that a full-blown mental health crisis may be taking root. According to a survey done through the school district in the spring, more than a third of the district’s roughly 30,000 students and staff likely have clinical symptoms of depression, anxiety or PTSD.”

There has been approximately 7 million cubic yards of debris removed from the area and an estimated cost of losses of over 25 billion dollars. The simplest and easy thing for many to do would have been to leave and not come back.

With all that has happened within the last year the region and its residents have shown a tremendous amount of resiliency. Though it may take several years before things are back to “normal” recovery moves forward. Businesses are being rebuilt, homes are slowly getting repaired and more of the city’s residents are moving back into the area. It is a testament to the strong will of the people and sense of community that residents push on.

In the 14th circuit volunteers and staff have also shown that resiliency as they continue to advocate for kids even though many are still putting their home back together, living in a camper or have blue tarps on their homes. They are still continuing to build the volunteer base and the foster homes impacted by the hurricane, while also addressing the impact of the trauma on the children in this area.

Knocked down, but not out.

CENTRAL REGION UPDATE

LEARNING AND GROWING WITH THE GUARDIAN AD LITEM PROGRAM

By Kim DelGaudio, Central Region Director

I started with the Guardian Ad Litem Program in January 2002 as a Child Advocate Manager (CAM). After being a CAM for several years, I realized I wanted to contribute more to the program. I knew one of the CAM IIs was getting ready to retire, so I let my Circuit Director know that I was interested in the position. It took me a long time to convince her that I could be a leader with the program as she didn't believe I had the supervisory experience needed. I searched out ways I could show that I was a leader - I signed up for Supervising for Excellence with DCF, created volunteer trainings and initiated "rap sessions" with my volunteers out in the community so they could meet their fellow volunteers and get to know them better. Eventually, when the position was vacated, I was promoted to CAM II.



"I decided I would continue to learn and grow no matter what my position."

It was difficult to overcome the idea that a CAM is not a supervisor, but it was very satisfying to know my perseverance paid off when I was promoted. I decided I would continue to learn and grow no matter what my position.

As Circuit Director, I started and completed my Master's in Public Administration and I entered the program to become a Certified Public Manager which I completed as Regional Director.

If you are interested in moving into other roles in our organization or continuing to learn and develop your skills, here are some ideas for you:

- Let your supervisor know you are interested in other opportunities. They can give you suggestions for projects that could help your team or circuit.
- Participate in training. There are many in-service options being offered to volunteers in your circuit, as well as the "I am for the child Academy", and hundreds of on-line courses and webinars.
- Get on Workplace. Check out the articles that are posted on the GAL Connect page. Like and comment on articles that you think are worthwhile. Share what you learn with your coworkers and volunteers.
- Look at ways you can improve on the work you already do. Do you see a more effective or efficient way of doing something? Let your supervisor know and get their support for trying out one of your new ideas.
- Explore getting a higher level degree or certification using the tuition waiver. Talk to your supervisor or HR Liaison for more information.

SOUTH REGION UPDATE

YOU HAVE TO HAVE BALANCE

By Kristen Solomon, South Region Director

Finding that work life balance is one of the most difficult things that I have had to learn to do. When I first started at the Guardian ad Litem Program, I had just finished law school, I was living with my parents, and had my now husband lived 4 hours away. It was easy to get completely wrapped up in my job and I loved it! But one night soon after I got married, my husband intervened.

You see my husband is the complete opposite of me, he comes home, puts the phone down (no emails for him!) and just enjoys being home. He has always been my rock and the person to keep me in line. I will never forget the night he asked (at like 8pm) "is it something you can fix tonight? If not, it can wait until tomorrow morning. Hang up the phone." He was adamant that this was not how we were going to start our marriage. Almost 10 years later, I still remind myself of that conversation and he still gives me that "look" if he sees the phone in my hand too long.



“You have to make time for yourself, your family and your friends. If you do not you will get burned out and lose the passion you had when you first started this career. ”

You have to have balance. You have to make time for yourself, your family and your friends. If you do not you will get burned out and lose the passion you had when you first started this career. People often ask me, “how are you not jaded by the cases you see all the time?” Truth is I love going to work every day and making a difference in the lives of the children we represent. I love inspiring people to take on a career in child advocacy. But I would not be able to do it without the wonderful support system at home.

When I became Regional Director in 2015, I had just had my second child. Starting this new venture was not easy with a 3 year old and an infant at home (sleep, what was sleep?) but keeping my focus on my children and husband when I got home helped me stay focused and energized at work. I am not going to lie and say it is always easy but I try really hard to “turn it off” and give my full attention to my kids as they deserve it just as much as my team deserves my full attention at work. I hope you all find your balance and the person to give you “the look” when it is time to turn it off and relax!



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