

GILROY DISPATCH

Gilroyan volunteers from the heart



ADVOCATE Gilroy resident, Linda Mitchell, has been volunteering with CASA for ten years and has found the experience helping children very rewarding.

By Roseann Hernandez-Cattani

Posted: Thursday, August 11, 2016 1:58 pm | Updated: 2:03 pm, Thu Aug 11, 2016.

“I wanted to learn something new,” said Linda Mitchell, a Gilroy resident who has been volunteering with Child Advocates of Silicon Valley for 10 years.

The group recruits, trains and supports Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASAs) in the region.

Mitchell had worked in human resources before retiring and was a teacher in the past, having taught high school students in subjects like business math and shorthand, so when a friend suggested she consider volunteering at CASA of Silicon Valley, she looked into it.

“Everything I learned about it was a great match,” she said.

CASA of Silicon Valley pairs eligible volunteers with foster children as they make their way through the dependency court system. CASA volunteers stay with their case until the child has a safe, loving home. In her 10 years of volunteering, Mitchell has mentored and provided guidance to eight children.

“You are more involved in the child’s life than you would being a Big Sister,” said Mitchell, referring to the longstanding mentoring program. “I call it a Big Sister with clout.”

Children in foster care can have different social workers throughout their time in the dependency system and are often shuffled between foster or group homes. As a result, they lack a consistent, caring adult in their life, according to the agency.

Volunteers provide that consistency as mentors, friends and advocates who represent their best interests in dependency court hearings. They commit an average of three hours per week plus court appearances. In Gilroy, 49 children have CASA volunteers, but 40 children still remain on the waiting list.

“Our goal is to provide a CASA volunteer for every child in the county,” said Laura Fulda, director of community development at CASA of Silicon Valley.

The agency, which just celebrated its 30th anniversary, is looking for more volunteers from Gilroy, San Martin and Morgan Hill.

To be eligible, volunteers must first attend an open house—the next one is in Morgan Hill on Aug. 16, and then once a month in San Jose starting in September.

About 1,600 children are in the dependency system in the county, said Fulda, and about 1,000 of those could benefit from a CASA volunteer. The agency served 783 children in the fiscal year ending June 30.

“We hope to serve 840 this year,” said Fulda. “We are on our way.”

At the end of the training, certified volunteers are sworn in by a judge.

Volunteers must be a minimum of 21 years old and undergo a background check and personal interview. Extensive training is provided.

“Several CASA volunteers are retired teachers, principals, young people who are in college—all different age groups,” said Fulda. “The one common thing I hear from them is ‘I should’ve done this sooner.’” While all are welcome, male volunteers are especially needed—about 19 percent of CASA volunteers in the county are male, she said.

“What kids need most is to feel they can depend on you,” said Mitchell. Someone to take them to the park for a couple hours, or if the child is a teen, someone to text at random times of the day.

“You are not expected to run out in the middle of the night to save the child,” said Mitchell. “You are not a case worker or psychologist. You just meet with them within fully prescribed parameters.”

Foster children are at risk of a host of negative outcomes. According to the agency, 60 percent of foster children under the age of five experience delays in language, cognitive abilities, motor-skill development and growth. Seventy-five percent of foster children in California function below their grade level. And of the approximately 4,000 youth who age out of the California dependency system each year, about 20 percent of them become homeless.

In addition to providing reliable adult support and a voice to speak up for them in court, CASA volunteers help connect the child with resources or activities.

Noticing one of her kids had an interest in tumbling, Mitchell put her in gymnastics.

“They don’t look at me like I’m almost 70,” said Mitchell. “The best way to their hearts is a common activity—draw or listen to music—see what lights their fire.”

CASA of Silicon Valley’s South County open house is Tuesday, Aug. 16, from 5 p.m. to 6 p.m. at Morgan Hill Centennial Recreation Center, 171 W Edmundson Ave, Morgan Hill.