

## Wish Book 2018: Foster child filled with anger gets special attention from CASA volunteer

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Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) Stacy Castle, right, chats with Kevelyn Duarte, 17, a former foster child, while meeting for coffee in downtown Mountain View, California, on Friday, October 12, 2018. Castle is a trained volunteer with the nonprofit organization Child Advocates of Silicon Valley and is appointed by the Juvenile Court, to a build a relationship with a foster child and advocate for the child's best interests in court. (LiPo Ching/Bay Area News Group)

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Every time an adult tried to help her, Kevelyn Duarte seemed to get a little more miserable.

Through no fault of her own, she found herself at age 13 living in a group home with troubled teens, relentless rules and an ever-changing cast of adults orchestrating her chaotic, lonely life as a foster child.

“It was like everyone was against me,” Kevelyn, now 17, said, “as if I did something wrong.”

So when Stacy Castle, a volunteer Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA), tried to set up a meeting time to get acquainted, Kevelyn resisted.

“She canceled on me steps away from the door a half dozen times — ‘I’m tired, I don’t feel good, I have homework’ — every excuse she could come up with,” Castle said. “I’m feeling like, clearly she doesn’t want me. She doesn’t need me. Why am I even appointed to this?”



Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) Stacy Castle, right, helps Kevelyn Duarte, 17, a former foster child, get information about opening a bank account at Wells Fargo bank in downtown Mountain View, California, on Friday, October 12, 2018. Castle is a trained volunteer with the nonprofit organization Child Advocates of Silicon Valley and is appointed by the Juvenile Court, to a build a relationship with a foster child and advocate for the child's best interests in court. (LiPo Ching/Bay Area News Group)

Kevelyn Duarte, 17, a former foster child, left, tries on the glasses of Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) Stacy Castle, right, while meeting for coffee in downtown Mountain View, California, on Friday, October 12, 2018. Castle is a trained volunteer with the nonprofit organization Child Advocates of Silicon Valley and is appointed by the Juvenile Court, to build a relationship with a foster child and advocate for the child's best interests in court. (LiPo Ching/Bay Area News Group)

Castle stuck with it, and over the next few years what started with an offering of pink "cakepops" from Starbucks grew into a trusting, empowering relationship.

Castle's job was to be the "one consistent caring adult" in Kevelyn's life — and it's paying off. For a girl who held such deep-seeded anger at the unfairness of her situation and feared at one point she would end up in juvenile hall, Kevelyn has reined in her worst impulses, found purpose in her life and is on track to graduate from high school this spring.

A donation to Wish Book would help the CASA program guide other foster children through the difficult dependency system and help provide Kevelyn with the one thing that could make her daily life — which remains a hectic jumble of public transportation responsibilities rarely required of a teenager — much easier.

But first the story:

Kevelyn doesn't like to talk about the details, but when she was 13, police were called and she was removed from her home. She was a high school freshman then, and without relatives nearby, Kevelyn was left confused, scared and alone.

She spent the first three nights on a couch in an overcrowded receiving center run by the Santa Clara County Department of Family and Children's Services before being placed in her first of several group homes. There, she wasn't allowed to have visitors. She couldn't leave the house unless she was accompanied. Chores seemed endless and punitive. She was exposed to drugs and drama, fights with staff and late-night runaways. One of her housemates regularly cut herself. Another stole her clothes and shoes.

Kevelyn locked her bedroom door each night.

"It was like, why am I here? This is not my fault," Kevelyn said. "That's why I was pretty mad. I felt very unseen, very unheard."

Rotating house staff checked on her every 30 minutes day and night and logged her activities in a file, with entries like "youth took a shower, youth went to bed at this time."

"It made me feel like an object, honestly," Kevelyn said. "They wouldn't even call you by your name in the computer."

She was too embarrassed to explain to her friends what was happening. She declined sleepover invitations: They would mean requiring the host family to be fingerprinted.

All this for a girl who was 13, 14, 15 and 16 years old.

In Santa Clara County, only 43 percent of foster youth complete high school. When foster children had advocates assigned to them, however, their chances of success improved dramatically. Some 95 percent of foster kids involved with CASA have earned high school diplomas, and 80 percent of those are continuing their education, according to Karen Scussel, executive director of Child Advocates of Silicon Valley, a national organization with an office in Milpitas. Of the 1,200 children in foster care in the county, only 600 have CASA volunteers.

“Children need an adult to say, ‘How was your day?’ and a lot of our children don’t have that,” Scussel said.

That’s what Castle did with Kevelyn. Castle already worked at Child Advocates, as the director of programs. But she wanted to understand what CASA volunteers go through, so she took the 30-hour training program and was sworn in as an officer of the courts. Her first charge was Kevelyn, who was just 14 at the time, and her first task was to get her back on track at school.

When Kevelyn refused to meet, Castle finally decided to show up at one of her weekly sessions with the social workers. It didn’t go well.

Kevelyn stormed out, slammed the door and shouted, “Why does she have to be there?”

But Castle followed advice from other CASA volunteers: Keep showing up.

Gradually, Kevelyn let her in. The two went to the movies, to Starbucks and walked to the nearby park. They came up with a plan for Kevelyn to feel more comfortable at school. Castle taught her how to drive.

Castle encouraged her to apply for a job at Chuck E. Cheese’s, where Kevelyn now helps run birthday parties.



Kevelyn Duarte, 17, refreshes the salad bar where she works at Chuck E. Cheese's in Cupertino, California, on Saturday, October 13, 2018. (LiPo Ching/Bay Area News Group)

For Kevelyn, it seemed that Castle understood her — and she listened when Castle suggested she tone down her confrontational style.

“It’s OK for you to feel this way, but you have to present it in a way people will hear your message,” Castle told her. “For her that made sense. She was maturing along the way.”

Castle helped get her back on track in school, too. Kevelyn joined the Explorer program with the Mountain View Police, and is president of the Spanish Club, which has lunchtime meetings on campus that Kevelyn calls “a safe place for everyone to be themselves and not be scared.”





Kevelyn Duarte, 17, smiles as she socializes with Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) Stacy Castle, in downtown Mountain View, California, on Friday, October 12, 2018. Castle is a trained volunteer with the nonprofit organization Child Advocates of Silicon Valley and is appointed by the Juvenile Court, to a build a relationship with a foster child and advocate for the child's best interests in court. (LiPo Ching/Bay Area News Group)

A chronic problem for Kevelyn, however, remains transportation. Once she turned 16, she was expected to get herself everywhere, including taking the bus to school, which could take some 90 minutes when she lived at a group home farther away. Once she moved closer to school though, her therapy appointments and job were back across town.

Wish Book donations could go toward buying her a reliable \$5,000 used car.

“I like the quote, ‘You never know how strong you are until being strong is the only choice you have,’” Kevelyn says.

Kevelyn plans to enroll in Foothill College next fall and become a police officer one day.

“Stacy made a difference. She’s still making a difference,” Kevelyn said. “She’s someone I can just trust.”