New Law Puts Children First

On Wednesday, March 23, Florida Governor Rick Scott signed the Child’s Best Hope Act into law. By signing this bill, Governor Scott is ensuring the best interests of Florida’s most vulnerable children is paramount. The new law allows judges to make decisions regarding adoption intervention using the child’s best interest standard.

Previously, the law viewed “best interest” differently depending on whether it was a family law case or a dependency case. It permitted a parent, even one who murdered a spouse, committed egregious abuse on a child, or who wished to punish a foster parent who had provided a loving home for the child, to choose who the child would be placed with for adoption. The court was only permitted to determine whether the placement was fit and proper; the court could not consider whether the placement was in the child’s best interest.

Effective July 1, 2016, dependency judges will now be able to “consider and weigh” all relevant factors, including, but not limited to: the permanency offered; the bonded relationship between the child and the
current caregiver; stability of adoptive home; reasonable preference of the child; and what is best for the child. This new law applies to all children where an adoption intervention occurs in dependency court.

Alan Abramowitz, Executive Director of the Statewide Guardian ad Litem Office commended those who championed this effort. “We appreciate Governor Rick Scott’s support of Guardian ad Litem volunteers and foster parents throughout the state. They raised this issue, and the Governor listened and supported the bill. It was a true grassroots effort to pass this legislation,” said Abramowitz.

**UNF Thetas Donate $6,000**

On January 13, representatives from the University of North Florida chapter of Kappa Alpha Theta presented the Guardian ad Litem Foundation with a $6,000 donation. The money was raised from the sorority's Kicks for CASA kickball tournament and other events held last fall. The Thetas also brought five boxes of school supplies, donated by Staples, for distribution to school-aged children in the GAL program. Kappa Alpha Theta is a nation-wide charitable partner of Guardian ad Litem/CASA and the UNF chapter was named GAL's 2015 Community Advocate of the Year.

**GAL Goes Globetrotting**

Cheers and laughter echoed throughout the Jacksonville Arena as the Harlem Globetrotters took their antics to the court. But for a special group of GAL foster children in section 108, this otherwise typical tour stop proved to be a rare and inspiring experience both on and off the court. The experience was donated, in part, by EU Jacksonville in support of the GAL program, its children, and families.
staff and volunteers. Fourth Circuit Director Melinda Brown said the response to the opportunity was nearly double what she usually sees for ticket requests.

Guardian ad Litem would like to thank EU Jacksonville, The Harlem Globetrotters and its tireless volunteers for helping provide a memorable evening for our deserving children.

Board Welcomes New Members

Guardian ad Litem is proud to announce the addition of two new members to the Board of Directors, Lynn Sherman and Andre Ayoub.

Lynn Sherman serves as Director of Community Engagement at Baptist Health where she leads community benefit initiatives that are designed to identify and address the unmet health needs in the community, set priorities and develop strategies to improve the health and quality of life families where we live work and play. It includes providing community outreach programs with faith-based partners, youth development organizations, elder advocacy organizations, community health screenings, health education and training the trainer for health disparities. She has worked in health care at Baptist for more than 30 years and has spent many of those years as a health educator.

Sherman is a strong community advocate. Under her leadership, the Tipping the Scale Mentoring Adolescent Advocacy and Intervention Mentoring Program has touched the lives of more than 1,500 teens and received national recognition. She coordinates the annual Sister to Sister Girls Empowerment Summit and served on health disparity coalitions for the Department of Health. She has served on the Board of Directors for the Jacksonville Urban League, Changing Homelessness of Northeast Florida, and Family Support Services of Northeast Florida. Sherman was a

SAVE THE DATE!
November 4, 2016

5:30-6:30 p.m.
VIP/Tours

6:30-9:30 p.m.
Cocktail Event, Silent Auction
Band

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recipient of the Community Connections Celebration of Leadership award; the Shirley Anderson’s Excellence In Mentoring Award and named one of the Jacksonville Business Journal’s Health Care Heroes. She is Leadership Jacksonville Alumni and one of six honored with the Jacksonville Business Journal’s “African-American Leaders”.

Andre Ayoub joined the Jacksonville Sheriff's Office in September 1995. He worked seven years in Patrol West (Zones 4 and 6) and was then promoted to Sergeant in June 2002. Ayoub spent two years as a Patrol Sergeant in Zone 4 before he transferred to the Child Abuse Unit. His experience in the Child Abuse Unit further fueled his passion to help children through his work with Guardian ad Litem. In 2006, Ayoub transferred to the Homicide Unit before getting promoted to Lieutenant in December 2008. He worked in Zone 5 for two years and then transferred to the F.T.O./Emergency Preparedness/CSO/Reserve Unit in 2010.

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SUCCESS STORY

This month’s success story was inspired by the determination of Guardian ad Litem CAM Monique Nichols. Nichols has served as a Child Advocate Manager for the past year. She recently received a case involving a child born addicted to methadone. The child’s mother was incarcerated at the time of birth and no father was listed on the original birth certificate. Due to governmental regulations, no visitors, including the maternal grandmother, were allowed to visit the child in the hospital until they had been cleared by the

VOLUNTEER SPOT

This issue’s Volunteer Spot is dedicated to GAL’s longest-serving volunteer child advocate, Sylvia Osewalt. Osewalt is a Florida native, born in Cherry Lake and raised in Tampa. After graduating from Hillsborough High School, she spent the next 35 years working as a civil service production controller, coordinating repair and overhaul of Navy ships. She then joined the Naval Reserve and retired as a yeoman senior chief in 1996, after 26 years of active and reserve service. Osewalt is a Deacon at First Christian Church of
Department of Children and Families, a process which could take days or even weeks.

Nichols, however, was keenly aware of the importance of physical contact and affection in a child’s early days. Studies have shown that preterm newborns who received just three 15-minute sessions of touch therapy for the first week of their life gained 47 percent more weight than those who had only received standard medical treatment. Therefore, she, along with GAL attorney Kimber Strawbridge set about devising a solution. Because Guardian ad Litem CAMs and volunteer advocates are already pre-approved for child visitations, Nichols and Strawbridge were able to create a daily schedule of GAL volunteers and Child Advocate Managers to immediately go hold the child in the hospital. The child made great progress, began gaining weight and was soon off all medications.

The child’s father was eventually located and the two were reunited. Thanks to the dedication of Monique Nichols, Kimber Strawbridge and GAL volunteers and staff, this special child received the best possible start and is a true success story.

Osewalt is a seasoned volunteer. Prior to becoming a GAL, she volunteered as a telephone counselor for Suicide Prevention/Crisis Intervention, serving on the speaker’s bureau, the executive committee, and as a trainer and facilitator for the survivors of suicide self-help group. She also volunteers with the Jacksonville Beach Police Department. For the past 26 years, Osewalt has served as a private Guardian ad Litem here in the Fourth Circuit, handling family law, criminal law and dependency cases.

Several years ago, the Fourth Circuit GAL office began a pilot program where certified GALs could have their dogs certified through Pet Therapy, Inc. and accompany them on child visits. Osewalt headed up one of the first “canine GAL” teams, along with her faithful companion, Missy. They still serve GAL children on a regular basis. The canine GAL teams are available to go with any volunteer child advocate who feels their child is stressed or unable to communicate and may be calmed and eased by having the team present. Judge Libby Senterfitt then requested the GAL program provide the therapy dogs in the courthouse on a weekly basis, easing stress for witnesses and victims both before their testimony and during interviews by the State Attorney. Under Osewalt’s direction, there are now five canine teams covering the courthouse schedule each week.

Happy spring! It is one of my favorite seasons – flowers blooming, temperatures starting to inch up and people are getting out enjoying these beautiful days. Spring always brings new beginnings. In April, we will be celebrating Child Abuse Prevention Month. As part of this, I would like to encourage and challenge anyone who is not already involved in the Guardian ad Litem (GAL) program as a volunteer advocate to learn more about it and seriously consider volunteering to help a child who desperately needs you. We need about 250 more volunteers. At any given time, there are at least 1,000 children placed by the courts in the GAL program for the Fourth Circuit (Clay, Duval and Nassau counties) alone.
What does a GAL do?

A Guardian ad Litem (GAL) is a trained, court-appointed volunteer who advocates objectively and solely for the best interests of children who are abused, abandoned or neglected and who are involved in dependency court proceedings. The volunteer GAL makes independent recommendations to the court by focusing on the needs of each child. The GAL advocates for each child’s best interest – emotional, physical, educational, environmental and social well being. A GAL serves as the eyes, ears and arms of the justice system. They identify the best possible result for each child whose care is now the responsibility of the state.

Who are Volunteer GALs?

- Individuals who respect a child's inherent right to grow up with dignity in a safe environment.
- Individuals who assure that the child's best interests are represented in the court at every stage of the case.
- Investigators, facilitators, advocates, monitors and reporters with the best interest of only the child at heart.

What is the role of a GAL?

- **Investigation:** Carries out an objective, systematic examination of the situation, including relevant story, environment, relationships, and needs of the child. The Guardian volunteer interviews family, friends, school staff, medical doctors, therapists, and anyone involved in a child's life.
- **Facilitation:** Identifies resources and services for the child and facilitates a collaborative relationship between all parties involved in the case, helping to create a situation in which the child’s needs are met.
- **Advocacy:** Conveys the best interests of the child to the court and relevant agencies.
- **Monitoring:** Keeps track of whether the orders of the court are carried out.
- **Reporting:** Reports findings and recommendations regarding the best interest of the child to the court.

Why Be a GAL?

The rewards are many:

- Knowing you are making a significant difference in a child’s life.
- Contributing to the health and stability of your community.
- Meeting new people with similar interests and values.
- Gaining valuable experience and building skills.

Click to find out more volunteer information from our GAL program office [http://galfirstcoast.org/volunteer/](http://galfirstcoast.org/volunteer/).

I can’t think of anything more important than giving a child who has been abused, neglected or abandoned the hope that you will speak up for them in court, with the schools, doctors and parents to ensure that child has a new beginning in the Spring of 2016!

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