



Testimonials

Amazing Maria

Born in Nicaragua, Maria and her sister Teresa were abandoned by their mother when they were toddlers. Maria was sexually and physically abused by her uneducated, alcoholic father for years before Maria's grandmother took her and Teresa into her home. Unable to care for both children, their grandmother paid smugglers to take Maria to the United States. Initially detained as an illegal immigrant, Maria was eventually brought by her aunt and uncle to their Miami home. Soon after, Teresa was also sent to live with their aunt and uncle, where—unknown to the grandmother that sent the children to America for better lives—both girls were kept as slaves in their new home. They did all the cooking and cleaning, they were not allowed to attend school, and they were regularly beaten by their aunt and uncle who threatened them with deportation. Only Maria was allowed to leave the house, to work illegally in a local restaurant to pay rent and buy food.

Encouraged by a young woman at her job, Maria went to the police who alerted the Florida Department of Children and Families who removed Maria and her sister Teresa from their horribly abusive situation. Placed in foster care in 2009, with the help of a caring and competent Guardian ad Litem advocate, Maria thrived despite her limited English proficiency. Her GAL supported Maria in high school and she graduated with a 3.6 GPA. A bright girl, Maria worked hard to pass the FCAT. She did well on the SAT and she now attends Florida International University (FIU). Her dream is to become an attorney so she can fight for children's rights.

Maria's GAL secured the support of Voices' Children's Needs Program, which provided Maria with food and clothing throughout her ordeal. She is now 20 years old, and pays rent in her sister's foster home so she can be near her younger sister. With the help of her GAL, Maria completed her financial aid applications and she is doing well at FIU.

Roosevelt's Rescue

Roosevelt is a resilient young man of 20 years who - despite a very difficult childhood - has persevered with determination to have a better life than the one he was born into. Roosevelt is the youngest of four African American children born to a mother who struggled with addiction her entire life. The life he shared with his siblings was fraught with constant fear that their mother might not return from the local bar she frequented at night; that one of her many "boyfriends" would seriously injure or kill his mother or one of the children in one of many violence-filled fights; or that they might not have food to eat. With

the love and loyalty of his older siblings, he survived. For example, when they had no clean clothes to wear to school, they would put them in the bathtub, pour in dish detergent and water, and dance around inside the tub to wash their clothes. Unfortunately, they often had to wear their still-wet clothes the next day.

At age nine, he and his siblings were placed in foster care for 18 months before their grandmother took them in. At the time there was no child advocacy for children placed with relatives and their case was closed. Sadly, Roosevelt's grandmother was abusive. Not only did she beat him and his siblings until they were bruised and bloody, she also denied them access to food and – as Roosevelt claims was the worst of her punishments – she denied them access to their mother. After six years of abuse, Roosevelt's grandmother threw him out of her house at the age of 17. This turned out to be a great blessing as his case was reopened and he was assigned to the GAL Program. According to Roosevelt, his GAL advocate not only helped him to get the clothes, anger-management counseling, and other things and services he needed to thrive, but also helped him so that, despite her need for addiction treatment, his mother could prove to the court that she loved him, she was a fit if limited parent, and that he should live with her, as was his desire.

With on-going assistance from his GAL advocate and Voices' Children's Needs (CN) Program, Roosevelt received a bed and other furniture plus funds for food, clothing, and after school activities that his mother could not provide for him. Roosevelt observed his court proceedings and determined that it was the attorneys who had the most power to influence outcomes for the children there. Thus, he decided that somehow, he was going to succeed in school, attend college, and go to law school. With his advocate's consistent care and encouragement, he built a network of friends and was set up to receive the Road to Independence stipend so that he could attend college.

Roosevelt gained so much confidence as a result of his relationship with his Guardian ad Litem advocate and the scholarship and other support that he has received from Voices' It Takes a Village (ITAV) Program (part of Voices' Children's Needs Program) that he spoke at Voices For Children Foundation's annual Be A Voice, Build a Dream Gala at Mandarin Oriental, Miami on January 14th, 2012. Now a sophomore at Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University (FAMU), Roosevelt has a 3.4 GPA and looks forward to completing his Bachelor's Degree in Criminal Justice in 2015. Planning to begin law school the following fall, Roosevelt's vision – which he is resolute about since he completed a brief paid internship at the Pittman Law Firm this past summer - is to become an attorney so that he can advocate for other children in the dependency system. He is committed to being able to help other kids to succeed in life...as he himself is doing!

The Only Mother He Ever Knew

James, born cocaine-exposed, was two months old when the Department of Children and Families (DCF) placed him in the loving arms of Geraldine Scott. Geraldine was a friend of the family who graciously provided a home for James and wanted to adopt him.

Two years later, arbitrarily and without warning DCF decided to remove James from Geraldine's care. In spite of her ability to raise four of her own children successfully, Geraldine was deemed unfit to raise James because she was poor.

Judge Cindy Lederman ordered DCF to return the child to the only mother he had ever known. DCF immediately appealed her decision and her authority to interfere in what they felt was within their sole discretion; the placement of children.

Fortunately for James, reinforcements arrived in the guise of child advocates. James was one of the lucky half of the kids in the dependency system with a Guardian ad Litem – a volunteer or staff person from the GAL Program who gets to know the child and his circumstances and makes recommendations to the judge as to what is in the child's best interest. In this case, funding from Voices For Children afforded James with Staff Guardians who visited him in Geraldine's home every month, and who knew the love that existed between what was mother and son – legal status notwithstanding.

The recommendations from Staff Guardians Amee Kauffman and Denise Lasarte consistently challenged and contradicted DCF. Their opposition was enhanced by the legal advocacy of GAL Staff Attorney Abbie Cuellar, a true champion for children like James.

On July 17, 2003, two years after DCF initially removed James, Geraldine was finally allowed to adopt James. If not for the concerted efforts of the Guardian ad Litem Program, staff guardians Amee Kaufman and Denise Lasarte, Louis Reidenberg, a retired attorney from Minnesota who was lured back into service for this important cause, Sister Jeanne O'Laughlin of Barry University who provided Ms. Scott with employment, Sister Pam Millenbach who coordinated services for Geraldine and James, and the army of pro-bono attorneys who fought on his behalf, James would have been another victim of the dependency system.

One Last Christmas

The children came into care because the mother left her five children, who were between the ages of 10 and 2 years, at home alone while she went to work. One child was playing with matches and started a fire. Fire rescue was called and the children did not sustain harm. They were removed and placed with a non-relative. The parental rights of the father for three of the children previously were terminated while the other father was incarcerated.

The mother completed her case plan tasks and was reunited with her children. Shortly after reunification it was discovered that the youngest child, 3 years old at the time had brain cancer. The mother had to reduce her working hours to spend more time with her child who was actually dying and also to ensure she was at home when the others were out of school. As a result, the mother could not keep up with her rental payments and was about to be evicted. The family was also in need of food. It was through the intervention of Voices For Children, which generously assisted with the unpaid rent so the family was not evicted and was also provided with assistance for food.

Six months later, the 3 year old who was dying of cancer was being released from the hospital to be with her family to die peacefully at home. The mother had no clothes for the child to wear at home. Again, Voices For Children came to the rescue of the family and provided clothing vouchers. The child spent three months at home surrounded by her mother and siblings and died shortly after Christmas of 2008.

Many hold out hope that the Courts can protect children, but the stark reality of too many cases is too few resources. Undoubtedly, in this case without the efforts of the Guardian and the financial backing of Voices For Children, this family would not have spent their final Christmas with their youngest member surrounding her with their presence and love.

Choosing to be a Mother

This is the story of eight siblings and their struggle to stay together with the only family they have ever known.

Tina, the mother of these eight children, was in “the system” as a child herself. At the age of 14, she lived on the streets and met the man who would become the father of her eight children; a man whose substance abuse problems and encounters with the law have prevented him from being a father to these children.

The Department of Children and Families intervened following an abuse report in which the father allegedly took his eldest son with him on a burglary spree. Additionally, this family of ten all lived in a hotel room, with reportedly one bed. As a result, the eight children were taken into custody and placed in six different foster homes.

A Staff Guardian was assigned to this case and worked overtime with the Department, Mother, Six foster homes and the Judge to ensure that while there is typically no communication amongst the foster homes, that these eight children not only be allowed daily telephone calls, but weekly visits with each other, and their mother. The mother had a good chance of being reunited with her children, if only she would terminate her destructive relationship with their father, who continued to fail to complete any of the services offered to him.

After months of working with Tina, the Staff Guardian helped Tina recognize that she had to make a choice between this man and her children. She chose to be a mother to her children. Over the course of the year, Tina filed a restraining order against the father, set herself up in her own apartment, and recently was reunited with her eight children. This family is still under the watchful eye of the department, but they are on their way, with their Guardian ad Litem advocating for their best interests.

It Takes One Advocate

This is the story of eight-year-old Samantha who was sexually abused by a man believed to be her step-dad. Not only was Samantha’s mother uncooperative with the authorities, she sent her oldest 16-year-old daughter to Puerto Rico so that she would not be available to testify against the step-dad, who also sexually abused her. As a result of her absence, criminal prosecution was not forthcoming. Samantha and her three younger siblings, who were known to be the biological children of Samantha’s step-dad, were placed in foster care due to their mother’s failure to protect them. When he was released from criminal court proceedings, reunification with his biological children was a feasible outcome. During this process, it was discovered that the step-dad was in fact Samantha’s biological father, a discovery that now put the courts in a precarious legal quandary. Naturally, Samantha, now being one of his biological children being considered for reunification, was terrified at the thought of being returned to her abuser. It was only because of the perseverance, advocacy and investigative skills of Samantha’s Staff Guardian, that she was able to locate Samantha’s older sister in Puerto Rico and contacted her through an uncle. With this new development, the criminal court case will be re-opened with the damaging testimony of Samantha’s older sister and the dependency courts can proceed with a Termination of Parental Rights as to the Father. Samantha and her siblings will not be returned to the hands of a sexual offender.