VOLUNTEER OF THE WEEK

Julie Scaife advocates for abused, neglected children

By Teresa Douglass
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When Court Appointed Special Advocate Julie Scaife visits with a CASA child, she said she listens more than asks questions. She tunes into the child and his or her environment.

For example, in one case, a mother accused of abuse and neglect was trying to get custody of her pre-school age daughter. At one point, the father had custody of the girl and the mother worked toward overnight visitations.

When the overnight visits started, there was a change in the girl, Scaife said.

So Scaife showed up at the mother’s home on a Sunday at noon unannounced. She found the mother asleep and the girl wearing a dress inside out, sitting on the couch eating a bowl of cereal she fixed for herself. The girl let Scaife in the door, another red flag.

The girl was returned to her father later that day and eventually, he got custody of her.

Scaife became a Court Appointed Special Advocate at a time in her life when she needed more to do, she said.

In 2008, she was going through some life changes. Her daughter moved out of the house, her mother died and her husband was working weekends.

“I needed to fill some time,” she said.

At the invitation of a board member, she became an advocate. In the almost six years she’s been with CASA, she’s been an advocate for half a dozen boys and girls. She said she gets as much out of it as the children do.

“It feeds your soul to have a little kid come running at you with his arms open,” she said.

More advocates are needed for new training session that begins Jan. 7. Before signing up for the

RECOGNIZE A VOLUNTEER

We’re looking to profile volunteers from nonprofit groups. Contact Teresa Douglass at 735-3289 or inspire@visalatimesdelta.com with your information.

HOW TO ATTEND

What: Training session to become a Court Appointed Special Advocate

When: 5:30-8:30 p.m. Tuesdays and Thursdays Jan. 7 through Feb. 6 with a swearing in scheduled Feb. 25.

Where: CASA office, 1146 N. Chinowth St., in Visalia

Cost: $45 donation to offset cost for the background check

Info: CASA 625-4007

Website: www.casatulareco.org

Orientation: Interested people are asked to attend an orientation before signing up for the training session. Orientation is offered Mondays at 5:30 p.m. and Thursdays at noon (except during the holidays, Dec. 24-Jan. 1).

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CASA volunteers advocate for children who have been removed from their homes because of substantiated abuse and neglect. Through no fault of their own, these children are dependents of the Tulare County Juvenile Court, said Marilyn Barr, executive director for CASA.

So far in 2013, 430 children have been served by volunteer advocates and 289 children are waiting for a trained volunteer.

“We could use another 500 advocates,” Barr said.

Advocates must be at least 21 years old and able to pass a background check. They need to care about children, be able to

Julie Scaife, 54, is an advocate for children who have been removed from their homes due to abuse and neglect. TERESA DOUGLASS

make a commitment to a CASA child and have common sense, she said.

As a sworn officer of the court, CASA volunteers visit the child about once a week and advocate for the child’s health, safety and well being. The advocate gets to know an appointed child by taking him or her on outings or helping with homework; meeting all the people in the child’s life, at home and at school and making written recommendations to the court based on the child’s best interests.

Scaife said she advocates for a child for about 18 months each. That’s the amount of time parents are given to get their act together, she said. She, along with therapists and social workers, recommend to the judge if the CASA child should live with his parents, another relative or stay in foster care.

Judges go with the CASA volunteers recommendation about 80 percent of the time, Barr said.

“They want a CASA on every case,” she said.