Silent no more

By Sabrina Garrett, adapted from The Lebanon Democrat

Every year, Laura Swanson, the executive director of CASA of Wilson County, trains numerous volunteers to help children going through difficult situations.

She can easily explain the mindset of these children to CASA [Court Appointed Special Advocates] volunteers, because she has been in their shoes. She knows what it is like to carry everything you own in a black garbage sack, and Swanson bravely shared her own story.

“My parents were divorced when I was three years old. Later, my dad was in a federal prison. I lived with my single mother, and, during that time, I was a child abuse victim.”

After suffering through abuse for two years, at the age of 12, Swanson shared her secret with her seventh-grade teacher.

“I actually didn’t know her that well. School started in August, and I told her about my abuse either later in the month of August or sometime in September,” she said.

“I cried and told her everything. She put her arms around me and walked me down to the school nurse. She and the school nurse talked for a few minutes, and they made a phone call.”

Swanson soon found herself seated in the Department of Human Services office.

“As I sat in the room with the worker who interviewed me, I became embarrassed and almost decided to tell her that I had lied. I hated the questions she asked me,” Swanson admitted.

She understands now that the worker was doing a job, and it saved her from further abuse.

Since her father was in jail and her single mother could no longer protect her, Swanson was taken to live in a group home.

“I had all of my life in a black garbage bag and these people that I didn’t know were going through all of it.”

Two weeks later, Swanson was taken to her first foster home.

“They had all these rules that I had never had before. Everyone had to make his or her bed and everyone had to eat breakfast,” she said.

Although she was unaware of it at the time, her seventh-grade teacher had gone through the process to become a foster parent. Swanson was soon moved to a second foster home — with that teacher.

Swanson said the young couple had children of their own, but welcomed her and loved her.

She remembers going into her new room and the couple’s 3-year-old daughter telling her that she had left her a surprise in a drawer.

Editor’s note: Grants from the Tennessee IOLTA program are awarded to organizations that provide services in one of two categories, either the provision of civil legal assistance to the indigent or the improvement of the administration of justice. For 24 years, a growing number of CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocates) organizations have received IOLTA dollars to support their efforts to improve the administration of justice. They do so by training volunteers who are then appointed by juvenile courts to advocate for individual children (or sibling groups) who have been abused or neglected. The CASA volunteer researches the child’s situation, may help facilitate social services and then recommends to the court the best possible permanent placement for that child.

During 2012, 18 CASA programs that serve 35 Tennessee counties (see page 3) will receive $73,740 in IOLTA grants to continue this work. The executive director of one of these programs, Laura Swanson of Wilson County CASA in Lebanon, is a survivor of child abuse. She did not have the benefit of a CASA volunteer when she was removed from her mother’s home, but she was able to beat the odds. Her professional life now centers on ensuring that children in similar circumstances have the involvement of a well-trained CASA volunteer. Read her courageous story (at right). On the back page, see the result of a CASA volunteer’s involvement in another child’s life.
Legal History Project

The Foundation’s Legal History Project continues its mission of recording the memories of Tennessee’s senior lawyers. As of September 2012, 79 individual interviews have been completed. This past year, six of the Foundation’s Fellows conducted friendly “depositions” with the men pictured at right. In addition to their varied law practices, the members of this group are serving or once served as a municipal, federal district, federal appeals or state Supreme Court judge, as state Attorney General or as speaker of the state House of Representatives. Each interviewee provided insights into his personal background and experience in the legal community and reminisced about people, places and events.

The Foundation is also pleased to announce that the Legal History Project collection (current and future), is now a part of the holdings of the Tennessee State Library and Archives. The interview masters will be housed in perpetuity, in a secure, temperature and humidity controlled environment. DVD reference copies are available to the public at the Library, just west of the Capitol, in downtown Nashville. A Finding Aid for the collection may be accessed directly from the Library’s website: http://www.tn.gov/tsla/history/manuscripts/findaids/2012-007.pdf.

Copies of the Project’s interviews may also be borrowed or purchased from the Foundation. The entire list of interviewees and the seven, 30-minute “best of” entertainment video collages, are available to view on the Foundation’s website, www.tnbarfoundation.org.

**2012 Interviewees**

**Completed:** Judge Herschel P. Franks, Chattanooga; Harris A. Gilbert, Nashville; Honorable William L. Jenkins, Rogersville

**Scheduled:** Justice Penny J. White, Knoxville

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“She had left me books and puzzles,” Swanson said. “They treated me so kindly and with so much love and respect … I will always be so thankful to my seventh-grade teacher for showing me that there was a better way to live life.”

“After my father was released from prison [Editor’s note: on charges unrelated to his daughter], I was able to go and live with him,” she said. Although her life was at a steadier pace, Swanson dealt with the effects of her childhood abuse into her late twenties.

She said that through counseling, church and sharing stories with others, she overcame her past.

“One of the things that is helpful is to know that others have had similar experiences and can say, ‘I know what you mean. I know exactly what you’ve been through,’” she said.

Swanson knows that statistically, she shouldn’t be where she is today. “People who are in those type situations [typically] don’t go to college, go on to get a Master’s Degree. They are not the director of a non-profit organization. I’ve not let the circumstances in my life dictate what I’m going to be.”

As fate would have it, Swanson has dedicated her life to helping others in situations that she has experienced firsthand.

“I never meant to end up in this line of work. When I graduated from college, I applied for a job out of the newspaper not really knowing what it was,” she said.

“It wasn’t until I was well into my work at the Department of Children’s Services that I realized that I was doing the kind of work that saved me all of those years ago.”

A few jobs later, CASA found her.

“The work that our volunteers do with children is incredible. Volunteers take time to listen and talk to children,” Swanson said.

Article continues on page 4.
Tennessee IOLTA Grant Recipients & Awards 2012

(Arranged by location of recipient’s main office. Many organizations serve a broader geographic area.)

Athens
CASA Corridor of East Tennessee — $4,000
The H.O.P.E. Center, Inc. — $3,000

Chattanooga
Community Reconciliation, Inc. — $5,000
Southeast Tennessee Legal Services — $3,000

Cleveland
CASA of Bradley County — $1,240

Clinton
Community Mediation Services — $4,000

Columbia
Hope House — $4,000

Cookeville
Aging Services for the Upper Cumberland — $8,400
Dismas House of the Upper Cumberland — $5,760
Genesis House, Inc. — $6,000
Mediation Services of Putnam County — $4,000
UCHRA CASA of Putnam County — $2,500

Crossville
Avalon Center — $9,000
VORP/Community Mediation Center, Inc. — $8,000

Franklin
Williamson County CASA, Inc. — $3,000

Hohenwald
Mid South Mediation Services — $9,000

Jacksboro
CASA of Campbell County, Inc. — $5,000

Jackson
Madison County CASA — $3,000
West Tennessee Legal Services, Inc. — $36,193
Wo/Men’s Resource & Rape Assistance Program — $2,500

Johnson City
CASA of Northeast Tennessee — $3,500

Kingsport
CASA for Kids, Inc. — $8,000

Kingston
CASA of the Ninth Judicial District — $4,000

Knoxville
CASA of East Tennessee, Inc. — $1,500
Catholic Charities/Immigrant Services — $2,500
Catholic Charities/Parent Place — $5,000
Legal Aid of East Tennessee — $100,204
Public Defender’s Education Advocacy Project — $8,400

Knoxville, cont.
Sexual Assault Center — $5,000
YWCA Knoxville — $7,000

Lawrenceburg
Kid’s Place / A Child Advocacy Center — $3,000

Lebanon
HomeSafe, Inc. — $4,000
Wilson County CASA — $4,500

Lexington
CASA of Henderson County, Inc. — $4,000

Madisonville
CASA Monroe — $3,000

Manchester
CASA Works, Inc. — $6,500

Maryville
Blount County Children’s Advocacy Center — $3,000

McMinnville
Families in Crisis — $5,000

Memphis
CASA of Memphis & Shelby County, Inc. — $5,000
Community Legal Center — $27,700
Exchange Club Family Center of the Mid-South, Inc. — $5,000
Memphis Area Legal Services, Inc. — $75,336
YWCA/Greater Memphis — Immigrant Women’s Svcs. — $10,000

Morristown
CEASE, Inc. — $5,000

Murfreesboro
CASA of Rutherford County — $6,000
Domestic Violence Program, Inc. — $8,000

Nashville
CASA, Inc. — $4,000
Exchange Club Family Center, Inc. — $6,000
Legal Aid Society of Middle TN & the Cumberlands — $121,467
Morning Star Sanctuary — $5,500
TN Coalition to End Domestic & Sexual Violence — $19,300
Tennessee Justice Center — $181,000
Tennessee Justice for Our Neighbors — $5,000

Springfield
CASA of Robertson County — $5,000

Total: $800,000
A CASA program case story from Middle Tennessee...

Two children, a brother and sister, ages 3 and 6, were removed from their mother and “safety placed” in the homes of relatives. A CASA volunteer was appointed by the court to assist in the case. The boy was placed with a stay-at-home grandparent and the girl went to her great aunt, a single, working woman. The mother slowly made her way through the requirements of the permanency plan, and, after a few months, it became evident that the children were not going home as quickly as once thought. The children were thriving in their respective placements, so arrangements were made for those to continue. Unfortunately, school would soon be out, and the aunt had no money for summer childcare. The Department of Children’s Services told the families that if the aunt could not find childcare for the girl, both children would have to come into state’s custody. They would be placed in a foster home, with strangers. Upon hearing this possible scenario, the children’s CASA volunteer went to work. She convinced a community resource agency to offer a “matching” grant and then sought funds to equal that amount. Within 24 hours, everything was set. The girl would be heading to day camp for the summer and both children could remain in the safety of their relatives’ homes. The thank you “note” from the girl is reproduced below.

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“It never had a CASA volunteer. The county where I am originally from still doesn’t have a CASA program. Only 45 of the 95 counties in Tennessee have a CASA program.”

Swanson hopes that through her story, someone will be inspired — inspired to get out of a bad situation, inspired to move forward or inspired to forgive.

“Forgiveness doesn’t mean forgetting,” she clarified.

“It means no longer wanting to hurt those who have hurt you. I have forgiven all that need it, for me, not for them. I am so happy in my life and all is well in my soul.

“My life experiences have made me who I am and I’m so happy with who I am.”

For more information on how CASA programs help children in similar situations, contact the state association at www.tncasa.org or call 800-TNCASA1 (800-862-2721).