



# THE GUARDIAN GLOBE

## 13TH CIRCUIT GAL PROGRAM



### Director's Note, Tabitha Lambert

We are back!! Our office is now open, so don't hesitate to come by if you need to pick up something for your families (diapers, toys, clothes) or just want to come say hi!

There have been discussions of court returning to in-person hearings for a majority of our hearings; however this is still vastly undecided. Many evidentiary hearings and trials will likely be held in person. Please be sure to check with your attorney and CAM to be sure of where you need to be for your hearings. We should know more very soon and be able to provide you with more direction on the courts' decision regarding in-person and virtual hearings.

For our volunteers who have never been to court in person, we are there to show you where to go! Please ask your CAM for information about courtroom numbers. It can be a bit confusing!

We have grown our attorney team lately, so please check out our [updated attorney directory](#) to get to know our wonderful legal team.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me via [email](#) or phone 239.771.0821. Thank you for everything that you all do to help our kids!

### GAL Hospital SWAT Team



### HELP WANTED

The Guardian ad Litem SWAT Team is looking for 2-3 additional GAL SWAT TEAM members, who can visit and hold substance-exposed newborns at Brandon Regional Hospital and St. Joseph's Hospital - South (Riverview).

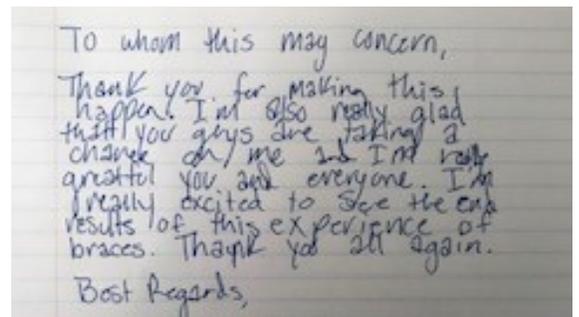
You must be fully certified, be actively working at least one case and be able to visit the baby regularly until discharge at a time best for your schedule!

If interested, please contact GAL SWAT TEAM Lead,  
Katie McCarey:  
[katiemccarey@gmail.com](mailto:katiemccarey@gmail.com)

## Helping perfect kids' smiles!



Did you know that Medicaid will not pay for braces for cosmetic reasons? Many of our kids may not receive braces to perfect their smile due to a lack of funding. Thanks to a special donor, we have been able to help some of our kids obtain a brighter and straighter smile! Here is one child grinning ear to ear after she got her braces! If you have a child who needs braces, talk to your CAM to see if your child is a candidate to make their smile perfect!



# Happy June Anniversary to our Volunteers!

## 1 Year

Kioni Lloyd  
Mickia Freeman  
Tamara Thomas  
Misty Browne  
Theodore Richter  
Katherine Roth  
Stephanie Robinson  
Carmen Devine  
John Allen  
Veronica Morales  
Brianna Gallion  
Meredith Morrison  
Dara Purcell  
Barbara Quintero  
Mary Lehr  
Devara Sims  
Demetra Strong  
Devan Hardaway  
Michele Moore  
Andrea Johnson  
Kelly Humbarger

## 2 Years

Mary Alpaugh  
Yvonne Szponar  
Juliann Davidson  
Noelle Longen  
Dani Smith  
Catherine Carr  
Brian Smith  
Synthia Fairman

## 3 Years

Melody Manning LeVine  
Sandra Muench  
Cheryl Stephenson  
Kristin Wilson  
Victoria Castillo

## 4 Years

Cheri Gattshall  
Katie McCarey  
Amanda Smith  
Gerrie Glover

Heather Frankel  
Jan Roberts  
Anaiah Boyce  
Gela Kasarda  
Tomika Cole  
Jennifer Turkel

## 5 Years

Roberta Mejia

## 7 Years

Karen Horii-Stever

## 8 Years

Lyn Young

## 9 Years

Gracia Sugantharaj  
Sheila Moree  
Lisa Griffin Hodgdon

## 10 Years

Miguel Isasmendi  
Sue Griffin

## 12 Years

Lavonne Henry

## 13 Years

Sean McSharry

## 14 Years

Kari Neller

## 16 Years

Sandra Show  
Kelleigh Amba

# GUARDIAN SPOTLIGHTS



In highlighting the volunteers, I would honor many of them in what they do to advocate for our children. Although, I would like to recognize one on my volunteers, Susan Moss, who has done extraordinary work. She has been in the Guardian ad Litem Program for just 6 months. She completes her visits on-time and documents them in Optima timely. She's managed to investigate, track down, and prevent from a young teenager being solicited by a perpetrator, which was been going on before the case was reopened. She had case management and the caregivers on board to advocate for the child and get all-around services for the child and her 8-month sibling. She is very involved and has had good communication with the caregivers, school, therapist, and doctors. She attends all hearings, staffings, and is currently working together with case management and Eckerd on a permanent placement with recent family-finding relatives. For herself and many of the volunteers, it has not been easy but they continue to thrive and fight for safety and best interest of their children. THANK YOU FOR YOUR HARD WORK.

~ Submitted by Santa Rivera, CAM



Erin Mollura is a stellar GAL that has been with our program for 3 years and has worked on over 12 complicated cases ranging from Expedited TPRs to Adoptions and happy reunifications. She is in constant communication with everyone on the case which helps accelerate permanency for her kiddos. Erin is a Military daughter, wife, and mother and has lived in 23 places after being born in Portland Oregon. She met the "man of her Dreams", Mike when she was in her 40's and has two grown sons and 5 grandchildren. Her hobbies are reading, yoga, long car rides with her husband and being pool or beachside.

Advocating for children and their families is truly a passion for Erin and she excels at every aspect of her volunteer role. She is 100% there for the child's best interest and she makes everyone on her cases aware of this. "I have waited my whole adult life to do this work. Sometimes it is hard, sometimes your heart will break, but sometimes...you will experience the most beautiful joy. Keep the kids first and the rest will follow." It was a pleasure to have her on my team and I know she will be an amazing CAM. Thank you Erin for all your hard work as a volunteer!

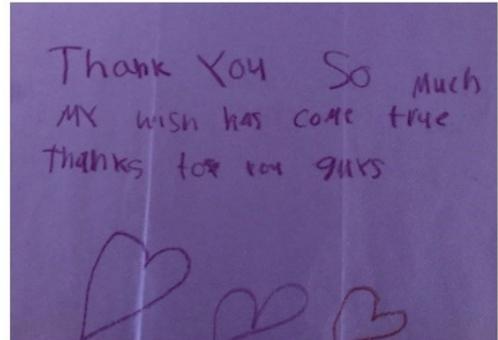
~ Submitted by Cat Granger, CAM

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# Non-Profit Partner, Voices for Children

Thanks to all of you for your unwavering dedication to the children you advocate for through the Guardian ad Litem Program. We can't tell you how much we appreciate those of you who have submitted thank you notes from your children, pictures of them with the items we've provided and shared your inspirational stories with us here at VFC. Your photos and experiences are one of the most powerful tools in telling our narrative. This information is critical when submitting grants and appealing to large donors. Donors want to see where their money goes and grantors want to know that their funds truly made a difference. It really brings our mission to life and makes a big impact!

**Voices needs your help!** We are looking for new hand-written thank you letters, heartfelt stories and photos to share with those who believe in our mission. Who better to provide us with this information than you – the folks who are out in the trenches and have the most influence on the outcome of these children. Writing a thank you is also a great learning experience for our kids. It teaches them gratitude and at the end of the day – it feels good. Names and specifics will remain confidential and faces will be blurred, of course. Feel free to reach out with any questions or submit items directly to Jennifer Starr, Executive Director, at: [jstarr@vfcgal.org](mailto:jstarr@vfcgal.org). Thanks for all that you do! Without you, our amazing GAL volunteers, we wouldn't be able to support these children in need.



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## Facility Dogs...for the LIFE of a Case!



In March 2018, I was asked to make Tibet available to a boy who would be presenting for a forensic interview at Mary Lee's House. I was told that the child had been burned. In my mind, I was preparing to see a cigarette burn or two on an arm or something. When this 8 year old black male child came off the elevator, I had to catch my breath. His burns were extensive. I mention his race because visually, burns on a black person in various stages of healing are quite stark to the naked eye. Patches of bright pink and white dotted his extremities. It was at that time I was grateful for my background in physical therapy and the work I had done in wound and burn care. I was uniquely prepared to lay eyes on this child. So....lesson #1 – if you request us for dog service, and the injuries are extreme, it's helpful to share that information with us. Please be as thorough as possible so that we are prepared.

That day when we first met this child, his affect was quiet but he was more than willing to have Tibet sit with him on the couch. Tibet has an uncanny knack for modulating her contact and she somehow knew that she couldn't flop her 60# frame down on him as she often does. She gently lowered herself alongside him and worked her head ever so gen-

tly onto his lap. His foster mother at the time stated that they were having a hard time getting him to wear his hand splint to keep his right hand from scarring in such a way that he wouldn't be able to open his hand fully. That day, for the time that Tibet was with him, he opened his hand to pet her. He told me that he likes to play football and I assumed he was right handed so we talked about the need to be able to open his hand enough to throw a football. (Thanks again, to my physical therapy background). After that day at Mary Lee's House, I thought our contact with this boy was over -- as is usually the case. When I started using Tibet in 2014, I had a vision of following children for the life of a case – being with them at each critical juncture of the case. This has unfortunately not been the case. I would find out though, that this case would be quite different.

The next time that we had contact with this child was at his adoption. As it turned out, one of the detectives that came to the scene the night of this terrible incident was touched deeply by the scenario and facts of the case. He visited the child in the hospital and established a relationship with the child. The child was in need of placement and an adoptive placement would be best. Enter Rachel Deer-Katz – advocate

# Facility Dogs...for the LIFE of a Case, cont...

extraordinaire. She asked this detective if he knew of anyone interested in taking the child and he indicated that he and his wife would love to have him. The woman that was with the child at the forensic interview in the paragraph above would eventually become this child's mother. The child's adoption occurred in Courtroom 1 on the 6<sup>th</sup> floor – exactly where his biological father would be tried for murder two years later.

Our third contact with the child was at his deposition at the Public Defender's Office last year. Now adopted and out of the Dependency system, the child had to provide the felony/criminal side of things with the details of that night. The state and the defense would need to evaluate to see if he could provide reliable testimony. Again, Tibet was at his side. It was important for both the state and defense to see Tibet's effect on the child's ability to provide testimony. You may assume in a case like this that testimony would only work against a defendant. In actuality there are times that truthful testimony actually helps the defense. That's what's so great about our dogs. They help the truth come out.

Fast forward to the third week of May of 2021 and I learned that Tibet's name had been mentioned in the preparation for the criminal trial of the biological father. I learned that it was the court's intention to have the child testify at Mary Lee's House with Tibet again by her side. It's unusual for a child to testify remotely in a criminal trial.

The facts of this case required extraordinary care to this child because the defendant was representing himself, and he was on trial for murdering this boy's mother, sister, and the attempted murder of the boy himself. The defendant would have the ability as his own counsel to cross examine his biological son and walk around the courtroom without shackles. Defendants have rights but victims also have rights. Those rights include rights of participation in the process that include being reasonably protected from the accused and to participate free from intimidation or harassment. The remote testimony and the aide of the dog were reasonable accommodations to allow this victim his rights of participation in such a way that he felt adequately protected.

What's important to note here is that because Tibet had a track record of helping this child at former critical junctures in the case, she was an additional accommodation for this child. The repeated use of the dog to help the child in these instances strengthened the case for using her at this time, where this man was literally on trial for his life. The child testified on June 16. He did a fantastic job as he hopefully... for the last time...had to talk about the events of that awful night.

The biggest reason we had the opportunity to follow this case the way that we did was because of Rachel Deer-Katz. Rachel is amazing. She has a wonderful relationship with this child's adoptive family. She stays in touch and stays informed. Rachel has a great relationship with our State Attorney's Office and they respect her. She consistently represents her kids and our program in a professional and caring manner. I can't say enough about her. I appreciate the hard work that she also did on this case. This child is now free to live a life in a permanent loving family – free to be everything he can be in this world. That is the biggest reward any of us have in doing this work.

In paragraph 1 I mentioned "lesson#1". Additional lessons:

2) If it makes sense, involve our dogs early and as often as possible. Forensic interviews, depositions, interviews with the State Attorney's Office, Forensic medical exams are just some of the ways that we help children provide testimony. (Always try to find out if the child likes dogs before you go down this path).

3) Stay informed and up to date with what is happening in the case. Let's face it. No one is lining up to make sure that the GAL program knows what's going on. That's our job to dig for information.

I am so grateful that we had the opportunity to serve this child. We've served hundreds of kids over the years and quite frankly, it's difficult to remember most of them but this child will be in the handful that will never leave my heart.

~ Submitted by Brenda Kocher, Team Tibet

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## Recruitment Corner

### *Is your Church up for a visit?*

Did you know that the Recruitment Team would love to visit your Church? We could speak with your small faith group, maybe your Sunday School Class or possibly host a table after the service on Sunday! If your church is still meeting virtually then we can make that work too, see how flexible we can be to get the word out about the Program! We would also love to have you share your experience as a volunteer, it really makes a big difference.

During the month of May, Idlewild hosted a table in their Gatheria after their services, there was information about the Guardian ad Litem Program and Foster Care opportunities with a sign-up sheet. Several people have expressed interest and we are following up with them to make sure that they know when our next Information Session is, what training is available and how they can become a voice for a child. If you would like to talk with Sharon about this please give her a call at 813-334-7001 or [email her here](#); Yvonne can be reached at 813-846-9717 or [email her here](#).

## *Featured Legal Lesson: The Importance of Speaking with Parents*

How often are you reaching out and interacting with the parents? Why you may ask? This is a very important part of assessing the best interest of the child(ren) in your case. Many times we are so focused on the child(ren) that sometimes we forget that the parents are important to our overall assessment of best interest. While the parents can sometimes be difficult, that should not prevent you from reaching out and interacting with them. It is an integral part of your understanding of both the child(ren) and the parents for these interactions to occur. There are many reasons that this an important part of your best interest determination. Having contact with the parents is also integral to the credibility of any testimony you might give throughout the life of the case.

The first reason to interact with the parents is that they frequently have the most information about the child (ren). They can provide a wealth of information about any special needs the child(ren) may have, whether it be medical, emotional, educational, or their mental health. The parents can also provide you with any other history about the child (ren) that might be important. Remember that even though the parents might have some issues to work on of their own, that doesn't mean that they do not have a handle on things that are important for their child(ren).

Another reason to interact with the parents is to determine the relationship the parents have with the child(ren). It is imperative that our program is observing some contact between the child(ren) and their parents. The bond between the parents and the child(ren) can help to determine what is in the best interest of the child(ren). Children are often bonded to their parents because that is the only caregiver they know, however that bond might not be a healthy bond. Observing visits helps us to determine if there should be family counseling as well as goal changes. We cannot rely on the word of others as to how visitation is going. Without our personal observation our position is based on hearsay which isn't permitted during our hearings. If you are required to testify during a motion or trial your first hand knowledge of the visitation is very important to support the position the program takes. Also observing visitation helps to determine how to structure the transition plan when moving towards reunification. It helps to have that established relationship with the parents if the child (ren) are reunified, because you will need to visit them in the parent's home.

Another reason to have continued interactions with the parents is to determine if they are benefitting from the services being provided. If you begin the interactions at the beginning of the case, you watch them hopefully learn and grow from the services and start to determine if they are exhibiting behavior changes that will allow a safe reunification. We are often given discretion to move cases towards reunification without further court hearings and your interactions with the parents helps the program determine if they want to move that direction. It also helps to determine if the goal needs to be changed. During the interactions with the parents

you should be discussing their progress on the case plan, what services have they started as well as what services they have completed. It is also important to discuss with them any barriers they might have with completing the case plan. Asking if the Case Manager is assisting with referrals and funding. Making sure the parents have everything they need to complete the case plan. But the more important question about the services is what have they learned. Asking them what they have learned during their time with a service provider will help you to determine if they are just checking the boxes of the case plan or truly changing their behaviors.

Another reason to have conversations with the parents has to do with placement. While the court and case management should be inquiring about this issue, it is also incumbent on us to help figure out if the parents have any relatives or friends that could be placements or help with visitation. Even if the child(ren) is in a relative placement it is always important to know of any other options in case that placement breaks down.

Last but not least it is very important that we not forget about the incarcerated parents. Incarcerated parents are often forgotten and are required to be included in the case planning process. We should be reaching out to the parent to make sure that they know about our program and efforts to do what is in the best interest of the child. Often the incarcerated parent isn't notified of things going on with their child and they are entitled to that information. Many of the prisons in Florida do allow for the incarcerated parents to complete their case plans and so it is important for them to receive their case plan and understand what services are available to them. They can also provide you information about possible placements. Knowing what is available to them at their prison to complete their case plan can help with moving the case towards permanency. While contact might be limited to written communication it is important to reach out and make sure that we are including them in our advocacy for their child(ren).

Engaging the parents is so important to the overall Best Interest that you, as a volunteer, are advocating for. Having a relationship with the parents will always help with your credibility as a witness as well as your ability to make sure that the case is moving in the proper direction. Knowledge is power and knowing the parents on your own terms gives you a lot of power in these cases. Otherwise you are relying on the reports of others and never really can be sure that you have an accurate picture of the parents and what is best for the child(ren). If you have any questions about contact the parents, do not hesitate to reach out to your advocacy team to develop a plan. They are there to help and guide you along the way!

*~ Submitted by Laurie Shane, Esq*

# UPCOMING TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES

**Thursday, 7/8 at 6pm**

## **Optima Training by Jill**

Join our trainer, Jill Krantz, in this enlightening Optima training. Learn how to enter placements, note disabilities, enter your trainings, and more! Contact your CAM for the zoom link!

**Monday, 7/12 at Noon**

## **JR Bootcamp**

Join Assistant Director and Attorney Michelle Blume to learn about the ins and outs of writing a stellar Judicial Review Report.

<https://zoom.us/j/97643586138?pwd=RkJoTmEwdnhBa2lMQ0VMTzIPYVFMUT09>

**Friday, 7/16 at Noon**

## **Brown Bag Lunch**

Join Circuit Director Tabitha Lambert and other volunteers to discuss program updates, see the office, or discuss cases. Feel free to bring your lunch!

*This training will be IN PERSON at the GAL Office! Register to attend by [emailing Tabitha](#).*

**Thursday, 7/22 at Noon**

## **Specialty Courts 101**

Get to know our Circuit's specialty courts. This includes Adoptions, Drug Court, Teen Court, and Early Childhood Court.

*This training will be IN PERSON at the GAL Office! Register to attend by [emailing Tabitha](#).*

**Wednesday, 8/4 at 6pm**

## **GAL Pal Training**

Do you have someone who wants to learn about our GAL Pal Program?

**Pre-registration required. Please [contact Jill](#) for more information.**

**Monday, 8/9 at Noon**

## **Optima Training by Jill**

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There is always the GAL Academy to catch up on those in-service hours that are needed to maintain your GAL certification!