

# Dear RESIDENTS

This month's feature article about the McGuire family is one that's close to my heart. As a court-appointed Guardian ad Litem (GAL) for abused, abandoned and neglected children, I, too, am involved with children in foster care.

As you will read, Tammy and her husband John have opened their home to dozens of foster children over the years and now run an organization that helps other foster parents welcome children into their own homes. Tammy frequently speaks at churches and to other groups, which have included child advocates in training to be GAL volunteers.

I have been part of the GAL program for about ten months. As an advocate for children in the Duval County dependency court system, our motto is "I am for the child," which means precisely that. The GAL program makes it possible for vetted and trained volunteers to serve as independent advocates for a specific child or children and to sometimes advocate for systemic changes to better protect the most vulnerable among us.

GALs gather facts about a child's case by reviewing confidential records and reports, talking with parents and foster families, and visiting the child at least monthly at his or her present home, school or daycare. We present our findings to the court with an independent, unbiased evaluation and recommendation about what we believe is required to serve the best interests of each child.

What many people don't realize is that everyone involved in a dependency court case is represented, usually by a lawyer, except for the child. It is the child's GAL who gives these individual children a much-needed voice for a judge to hear when deciding these cases.

Currently, I advocate for two young boys and recently gained permission to transport the older one, a six-year-old who has had a difficult life so far. After visiting him at his foster home and daycare several times, we ventured to Chuck E. Cheese together, a first for me. Even though it's a place packed with children who like to scream at the top of their lungs to convey their delight while playing coin-operated games and eating pizza,

we both had fun. I felt that, for the first time in my presence, this little boy could enjoy himself like any other kid having a carefree time pumping tokens into game machines. It was on that day that we began to develop a tentative bond that allowed me some insight into a troubled boy's thinking and behavior.

While the goal is to reunify a family often broken as a result of substance abuse or another difficulty, sometimes the realities make that worthy goal impossible. In those cases where termination of parental rights is the only viable option to protect the child, a team of child protection workers is at work to hopefully ensure the child gets adopted into a caring, stable home. Sadly, there are far more children in need than there are volunteers to represent them. These children need and deserve a loud voice to speak for them, to give them the opportunity to realize their potential in life. In the giving spirit of the season, I urge anyone who has the time and willingness to help a child to consider becoming a volunteer GAL. It is crucial work that can be extremely rewarding and can make a real difference for a child. Please go to [www.galfirstcoast.org](http://www.galfirstcoast.org) for details.



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