



Darryl M. Bloodworth, Esq.

Florida Bar Foundation's Children's Legal Services Grants Help Support the Legal Aid Society's Guardian ad Litem Program

David was only 7, so he believed his mother when she left him with a friend and said she would be back for him in an hour. He waited. An hour came and went.

When his mother never came back, David entered the juvenile system as a dependent child and Stephanie Stewart, Esq., an attorney with the Legal Aid Society of the Orange County Bar Association, was appointed as his Guardian ad Litem.

Stephanie found that David had been physically and emotionally abused by his parents, who had substance abuse and domestic violence issues. In 2007, parental rights were terminated. Meanwhile, David's abuse was manifesting itself through poor hygiene, insomnia, mood disorders, and disruptive behaviors. Stephanie ensured he received counseling services and that he was not overmedicated for mood disorders, a problem she discovered when reviewing his medical records.

She also attended school meetings to discuss his behaviors and educational needs, and to develop his Individualized Education Program and behavioral intervention plans. David's behavioral issues led to placements in more than 10 foster homes, as well as involvement in the juvenile justice system. Stephanie requested placement in therapeutic foster homes that were better equipped to manage his behaviors.

As David's Guardian ad Litem, Stephanie knew that his behaviors would one day stabilize and a family could be found for him. She fought to maintain adoption as his permanency goal. A loving forever family was found for David, and now a new child has emerged. David no longer has behavioral issues. He dreams of going to college and being a role model to his siblings, and he looks forward to his upcoming adoption finalization.

In the early 1990s, recognizing that children have special legal needs and that those needs were going largely unmet, The Florida Bar Foundation began funding special annual grants for legal assistance

to children. The Foundation's priorities for its Children's Legal Services grants include representation of foster youth and access to special education, medical, developmental, and mental health services that are required under law. The Legal Aid Society of the Orange County Bar Association has received \$1 million in Children's Legal Services grants since the program began.

The Foundation has made the Children's Legal Services Grant Program one of its top priorities in the face of the devastating impact of low interest rates on revenue from Florida's Interest on Trust Accounts (IOTA) program.

Gifts from attorneys to the Foundation from the Children's Legal Services Campaign on the annual Florida Bar Fee Statement help support the Foundation's Children's Legal Services grants, along with proceeds from The Florida Bar's Kids Deserve Justice license plate initiative.

A 28 percent increase from 2012 to 2013 in contributions from Florida attorneys through The Florida Bar Fee Statement and direct gifts to the Foundation helped soften the cuts to the Foundation's Children's Legal Services grants in the 2013-14 fiscal year, although the IOTA revenue crisis still necessitated cuts. With 2013 contributions of \$276,000, Florida Bar members provided 30 percent of the total funding for the Foundation's 2014 Children's Legal Services grants. The Legal Aid Society of the Orange County Bar Association received a Children's Legal Services grant of \$55,403 this year.

I would like to thank all of those who contributed during this time of critical need. Your help has made a tremendous difference in the lives of youth who might otherwise be without a voice.

Darryl M. Bloodworth, Esq., founding shareholder of Dean, Mead, Egerton, Bloodworth, Capouano & Bozarth, P.A., is a past president of The Florida Bar Foundation. He served as a member of the OCBA Executive Council (1978 - 1983) and as its president (1982 - 1983).