

A journey to save the children

■ A volunteer and a stranger show how the Guardian Ad Litem Program can help children survive dysfunctional families and the judicial process.

By KIM GILMORE
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The details of their young lives are agonizing: four brothers and sisters who were forced to rely on each other for survival but who often were separated.

While apart, they prayed.

While together, they witnessed terrifying acts of domestic violence and drug abuse by their parents.

But the same parents who neglected them also refused to relinquish their rights. Instead, they did just enough to skirt social workers from the state Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services, the agency charged with protecting the bond between parent and child.

In the end, it took more than the system to save the children. It took the help of an angel and a stranger.

A "guardian" angel whose motivation was simply her love of children.

A stranger who had waited 17 years to adopt a child.

Together, Bernice Moore, then a volunteer with the state's Guardian Ad Litem Program — a court organization that assigns volunteers to represent the best interests of children embroiled in legal battles — and foster parents Paula and Rick Heuk worked mercifully to save the children from being further victimized and to provide them with a future.

Their lives today are an example of how the Guardian Ad Litem Program can help children survive dysfunctional families and the judicial process.

Drugs, violence and hunger

Jason Heuk, 12, has been through a lot in his short life.

From the time he and his sister, Serena, 7, and brothers, Jeremy, 9, and Jamie, 6, were born, they lived in more than a half-dozen locations in Citrus and Hernando counties.

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"Almost from birth, they've been in and out of foster care except for 11 months," said Kathleen Cossey, a case coordinator for Florida's Guardian Ad Litem Program.

Shuffled from one relative's home to another and often living apart, the young children said they watched their parents buy, sell and use drugs. Both parents have a history of arrests.

According to Citrus County court records, in 1987, Dawn Hamlin, 33, the children's mother, who now lives in Homosassa, was arrested twice: once on trespassing charges and later on child-neglect charges. A judge put her on probation and ordered her to drink no alcohol, attend a substance-abuse counseling class and submit to weekly drug tests.

In 1994, the children's father, Ray Ralston, 38, of Lecanto, was arrested on charges of possession of unauthorized prescription drugs. The charges were later dropped, according to court records.

Several attempts by the *Times* to reach Ralston were unsuccessful.

"Ray and I were into the drugs real heavy and the partying," Hamlin said about her courtship with Ralston. "What it came down to was when I didn't do what he wanted me to do, I got the s--- beat out of me."

Because he is older, Jason most vividly recalls the bad memories of his mother and father. "I remember one time he hit her head real hard, and there was blood all over the wall," he said.

Added Jeremy: "You really get used to it."

In 1990, HRS placed the children in the temporary custody of Paula and Rick Heuk for about four months. The couple already had raised Mrs. Heuk's two sons from a previous marriage and had been foster parents for other children throughout their 11-year union.

Still, deep inside, the Heuks longed to adopt more children, maybe even this group, who over the next few years returned to live with them several times.

Mrs. Heuk, 44, said the first time she met Hamlin's and Ralston's children they were emaciated and had eating disorders.

Serena, then a withdrawn 2½-year-old, was still being fed from a bottle and had never tasted solid food. The other children said they often went without eating at all.

"Sometimes they fed you, sometimes they didn't," Jason said about his parents.

Jeremy recalled the ghastly appearance of his brothers and sister. "All of their ribs showed," he said.

In 1991, a ray of hope shined through.

The children's mother, in jail, got the bittersweet news that she was pregnant again. The Heuks adopted Hamlin's infant son, Dustin, now 3, at birth.

Still, neither Hamlin nor Ralston would give up custody of their other four children.

So early in 1992, the court assigned Bernice Moore, then a volunteer with the Guardian Ad Litem Program, to monitor the welfare of the children.

Labor of love

Moore represented the children before the court and social service agencies, and tracked each child's progress.

Most of all, she listened to the children and to Hamlin.

"She'd come out and she'd talk with me and take the kids to McDonald's," Hamlin said.

She said Moore also paid for her children's Christmas presents one year and wrote to and visited her and Ralston's oldest son, Kevin, 15, who was enrolled in the Eckerd Youth Challenge Program south of Brooksville. Kevin now lives with his mother.

To Moore, it was all a labor of love.

"I love working with children, and I was new to the area," said Moore, a former teacher's aide for children with disabilities. "I just felt (being a guardian) was something that would be beneficial for a child, because sometimes (HRS) caseworkers are changed, and as a guardian you're someone they can count on in their life."

Cossey said that as the children's advocate, Moore was committed to building a rapport with them.

"We're sort of like the eyes and ears of the judge and the mouth of the child," Cossey said. "We nudge, we push, we yell, we scream, we jump up and down. We do whatever it takes to get things done for our kids."

Added Moore: "What we are is really the spokesperson for the child."

Through weekly visits to the Heuk home, Moore earned the trust of the children, and they soon began to confide in her. She said it didn't take long to see they were happy and well-adjusted living with the Heuks.

"The two older siblings refused to return home. They didn't even want visitation with their parents," Moore said. "(Jason) would get headaches and stomachaches. . . I think it was a mixture of disloyalty and loyalty."

Moore said that as the younger children grew older, they too wanted to divorce their parents.

She recommended to the court that the children first be counseled.

"(Counseling) confirmed this is what they wanted," said Moore, who spent the next two years trying to convince the parents it was in the best interest of their children to let the Heuks adopt them.

Giving up parental rights

In the spring of 1994, Moore deliv-

ered bad news from the children to their father: The children no longer wanted Ralston to be their daddy.

"He would sit and cry and tell me how hard he was trying," Jason said. "I figure if he wasn't a drug user and he didn't have that bad of a background, he would be a good father."

If this all sounds like a job for HRS, it is not.

While HRS and the Guardian Ad Litem Program often work toward the same goal, Cossey said an HRS social worker's job is to make a case for the court. "It is the responsibility of a guardian to make a case for the child.

"We don't work with HRS per se. We're not part of the HRS system. The guardian program is part of the judicial system," Cossey said. ". . . We look at the best interest of the children, where HRS is looking at the best interest of the family."

Moore's relentless crusade eventually paid off.

"Basically, Bernice hung in there, made a pest of herself, made the mother and father trust her. She's the one who convinced the mother to terminate her parental rights," Cossey said.

Said Hamlin: "I was going off on my own to get away from a relationship I had (with Ray), and I knew I couldn't take care of them myself being a single parent."

In the summer of 1994, the children's father reluctantly followed suit.

"It was the HRS worker who convinced the father it was in the best interest of the kids," Cossey said. "She hung in there. I would say she went above and beyond."

The nightmare officially ended last fall when the Heuks adopted all five children.

"It felt wonderful, because I knew this was exactly what the children wanted. They didn't want to be separated, that was the biggest thing," Moore said. "How often can you find a home that will take five children?"

Circuit Judge Patricia Thomas presided over the adoption.

"Sometimes the only kind words that these kids hear come from the Guardian Ad Litem Program," Thomas said. "Depending upon your experience as a guardian, you can make an incredible difference. You get a good guardian in there, and they can help not just the kids but the whole family."

"It was an incredible impact in this case."

'It's like we're home'

To celebrate their new family, the Heuks — all seven of them —

threw a pizza party at their home in Floral City.

"It's like we're home, really home," Serena said. "Now I feel good."

"It's like we're not going to be moving around," Jeremy said.

Hamlin did not celebrate.

She said she misses her children and has had no contact with them since a brief reunion in a Wal-Mart parking lot two years ago. Since then, their only communication has been holiday gifts exchanged through Moore, who no longer represents the children.

Despite the separation, Hamlin is grateful to the Heuks.

"They're good people. The adoption was a big deal for Rick (Heuk). He's spoiling them rotten," Hamlin said.

She said she hopes one day to reconcile with her children, but fears it will cause them to have "flashbacks of when Ray and I were fighting."

"I'm not going to force them into it," said Hamlin, who recently married Raymond Randolph and is attempting to straighten out her life. "I don't do no drugs no more, and I only drink every now and then."

The Heuks' life also has changed since the adoption.

Their once tranquil reality has all but disappeared. Household chores have been pushed to the wayside, shifted.

Rick Heuk, 34, a correctional officer in Sumter County, does most of the cooking.

Paula Heuk, now a full-time mother of five, said she doesn't have much time to clean house or work outside the home. Instead, she and other mothers take turns babysitting for each other.

"I don't see how people with kids can work, though I'm thinking about working to get a rest," she said jokingly.

She said she is grateful to Moore and the Guardian Ad Litem Program for her new-found mania.

"(Moore) could devote more time than a social worker. It was just like if you had a grandmother who was looking out for the best interest of the kids," Mrs. Heuk said. "I don't know if they'd be adopted if it wasn't for Mrs. Moore."

To Moore, it was time well spent.

"We (guardians) make a difference because we have the time," she said. "(Mrs. Heuk) wanted some little ones around the house, and she got them. I feel like they're grandchildren at this point."

— Staff writer Jim Ross and researcher Carolyn Hardnett contributed to this report.