

A VOICE FOR CHILDREN

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Childhaven Board President, Bill Young, left, and Amy O'Neill, center, award Barbara Van Ryan with the Volunteer of the Year recognition for CASA volunteers, during a Nov. 10 appreciation luncheon - Debra Mayeux photo..

An event to celebrate the volunteer efforts of Court Appointed Special Advocates packed the banquet room Nov. 10 at the First Presbyterian Church.

A program coordinated by Childhaven, the Court Appointed Special Advocates are volunteers who meet with abused and neglected children, their parents and sometimes social workers to determine the best possible living situation for the child.

They follow that child through the court system and provide a voice for the child. "When we started this program 15 years ago, we had six volunteers. Today, we have 61 volunteers, and every child in the system has a CASA volunteer," Children's Court

Judge Karen Townsend said.

"The children appreciate your involvement," Children's Court Judge Sandra Price added. Since the volunteers are a voice for the children, the judges said they appreciate their reports and take them to heart when making potentially life-changing

decisions for children in foster care. "I don't know what I'd do without that succinct information," Price said. "After reading the CASA reports I feel like I really know these kids, their parents and what's going on in their lives."

There are 15 CASA programs throughout the state, and they receive assistance from Ellen Janai, with the New Mexico CASA Network. She said that 1,700 children were assisted statewide in 2010 by CASA volunteers, and those volunteers work at doing what's best for the children.

"CASA programs only exist and are able to do what they do because volunteers like you are able to be a voice for abused and neglected children," Janai said. "The information you provide is invaluable."

Each CASA volunteer is matched with a child. Their job is to follow that child through the court system and be the child's voice – advocating for what the child wants to happen in their life. Those volunteers, who go above and beyond the call of duty, are recognized each year at the luncheon.

This was the 13th annual appreciation luncheon, and several awards were doled out during the event. Some were "silly awards," according to CASA director Amy O'Neill. Those included the Frequent Flyer Miles award for Brenda Gable; the Santa's Little Helper award given to Carami Miller; the Survivor award for Bessie Knedler; the Detective award to Candice Yazzie; and the Easy Button award for Polly Hopkins.

Other were recognized for numerous years of support, including Pam Breithaupt who has volunteered for six years; Corrine Estrada, who has volunteered for seven years; and Amy O'Neill, who has been a CASA volunteer for 11 years.

The volunteer of the year went to a Farmington woman with a commitment to her children. "We are in awe of this volunteer who has a strong passion to advocate for teenagers," said Bill Young, president of Childhaven, as he introduced Barbara Van Ryan, who has "a strong passion to advocate for teenagers," assisting them in finding a permanent and loving home. She has even taken two teens into her home as foster children, and continually works with teenagers to teach them life skills and confidence.

"She talks the talk and walks the walk," Young said.

Van Ryan was shocked by the award. "I had no idea, but I love my kids. They are awesome kids and they keep doing better every day," she said through tears.

"Barbara has worked very hard," O'Neill said. "She does find great joy in seeing the good strides that have been made by everyone involved."

For more information about CASA, or to become a volunteer, call O'Neill at 592 0168.