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Austin Area Judge Honored as Fierce Fighter for Texas Foster Children

AUSTIN, TEXAS (October 14, 2008) – Court Appointed Special Advocates™ (CASA) just announced its winners of statewide awards for their work getting children in to safe permanent homes. The winners included a nomination by CASA of Travis County for Judge Darlene Byrne of Austin.

Most people can recall a special adult from their childhood who entered their world at a critical moment in their lives. In 2007, 47,104 Texas children were in state custody. For 20,509 of those children, that person is their CASA volunteer. Texas CASA, Inc. and 68 local CASA programs including CASA of Travis County, gathered in Austin to honor those more than 5,000 volunteers. During “The CASA Story”, 19th Annual conference, Texas CASA announced the winners of five statewide awards given to people who have dedicated themselves to ensuring the safety of Texas children.

“When a child enters the foster care system, this is a critical time for that child and it is imperative that the child feels that he or she is the main focus,” said Joe Gagen, Texas CASA CEO.

A CASA, or Court Appointed Special Advocate, is a committed volunteer, appointed by a judge, who talks to everyone involved in a foster child’s life including doctors, caseworkers, teachers, and others then makes recommendations to the court about how best to help that child. “In a child welfare system challenged by increasing caseloads, a CASA volunteer can make the single greatest difference in the life of child,” added Gagen.

Winners were nominated by their local CASA program for exemplary service on behalf of Texas children. 2008 honorees include:

The Honorable Judge Byrne—Lone Star Proud for Kids Judge of the Year

Judge Byrne has listened to CASA cases in Travis County for 5 years. She not only advocates for children from the bench but actively recruits CASA volunteers wherever she goes. Judge Byrne has educated members of the legislature on the value of CASA, including testifying before the House Human Services Committee about the value to her of CASA in Child Protective cases. She said at the time that she always looks forward to the “courageous and commonsense” recommendations of CASA and wished that she had a CASA on every case. Judge Byrne treats every party in court with respect while ensuring that they are carrying out their duties. She is the Chair of Data Subcommittee for the Permanent Judicial Commission for Children, Youth and Families of the Supreme Court of Texas. She is the founder of the Travis County Family Drug Treatment Court. She is a member of the Founders’ Club for the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges. She is a Founding Life Fellow of the Austin Bar County Juvenile Justice Board. In 2005, she received the Government Service Award from Travis County Women Lawyers’ Association.

About CASA of Travis County

CASA of Travis County is the only organization in Travis County appointed by judges to be *guardians ad litem* in child protective services cases. CASA provides advocates to speak up in court for the best interest of children who have been removed from their home due to abuse or neglect. CASA recruits, trains, screens, and supervises these community volunteers so that they may properly advocate for the best interest of the child. Volunteers drive the success of CASA and do so by being the voice so many children are left without. CASA volunteers not only spend time with the child entrusted to them but also meet with the child’s school, doctor, and care-giver in order to better assess recommendations they make to the court. CASA of Travis County was established in 1985 and continues to grow with over 400 trained volunteers serving more than 1,200 children each year.

For further information on CASA of Travis County, visit www.casatrails.org.

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