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Dustin Haley can't wait to be the advocate for youth in foster care that he never had

AUSTIN, TEXAS (November 21, 2011) - On December 6th, University of Texas student Dustin Haley will turn 21, but his birthday plans are a little out of the ordinary. Dustin has been in training to become a CASA volunteer, but he can't start on a case until he turns 21. One might wonder why someone in the middle of his busy college experience is so excited about committing to volunteering with CASA and advocating for children who've been abused or neglected, but Dustin has a pretty good reason. He's knows exactly what these children are going through.

Dustin entered the foster care system at age 8 along with his sisters. His mother had severe problems with alcohol abuse, was rarely home to care for her children and was often abusive to his sisters. Dustin lived in 13 different homes (almost never with his sisters) and went to 10 different schools before he aged out of the system at 18. At 14 he had a chance at adoption, but it didn't work out between him and the family. "I couldn't call them Mom and Dad because those were terms I never liked to use, but I thought of them as my parents. They didn't feel I was affectionate enough," shared Dustin.

Dustin never had a CASA volunteer, but knew youth who did. "I saw them hang out with their CASA. They seemed a lot happier with this person around," recalls Dustin. Even though he never had that constant adult, Dustin is ready to be an advocate for others. "There are kids in the system in huge need of support right now, especially those who are going to age out, and I can hopefully encourage them to get through. I know it can get better and that there are resources out there for them," says Dustin.

Dustin's case is unique. Youth who age out of foster care are at higher risk for unplanned parenthood, unemployment, welfare dependency, incarceration and homelessness. Dustin focused on school, knowing that a good education would be his best chance. Dustin shares that "having a goal to go to a good college got me through all the transitions. A lot of the other kids in the homes I lived in were trouble makers, so I just went home and did my homework each day. I tried to stay away from that."

It worked. Dustin's studying kinesiology at UT and plans on attending grad school for physical therapy. He loves the medical field and anatomy, and wants to develop long-term relationships with patients where he can see them improve over the course of their treatment. He still uses "studying as a way to work through what's happening in my personal life. When you age out of care you don't have parents to go home and talk to. You have friends, but who do you go to when you have friend problems?"

Now Dustin's ready to share his experience as a CASA volunteer working with teens that are most likely going to age out of the system as well. He called CASA last summer, knowing he could better manage the 30-hour training when he wasn't in the middle of classes. He's just waiting for his 21st birthday so he can get started on a case. Dustin shares, "I feel like I've always tried to volunteer but it's been tough. To work with kids in foster care you pretty much have to be 21, so I've been waiting for December 6th!"



When asked how all of the years of moving home to home and school to school affected him, Dustin says, “You carry different things from each placement with you. I think I probably have a better life now than I might have had living with my mom, so I don’t have any hard feelings. Some people have that hole to fill that their parents left behind, and often they continue the cycle of abuse and neglect to their own kids. That’s not going to be me, and I want to help other kids break out of it as well.”

About CASA of Travis County

CASA of Travis County speaks up for children who’ve been abused or neglected by empowering our community to volunteer as advocates for them in the court system. When the state steps in to protect a child’s safety, a judge appoints a trained CASA volunteer to make independent and informed recommendations in the child’s best interest. After 33 hours of intensive training, background checks and being sworn-in by a judge, volunteers are appointed to a child or family of children and spend an average of 20 hours a month advocating for these children for at least a year. Created in 1985, CASA of Travis County is now one of the top ten CASA programs in the nation, supporting 500 volunteers who advocate for approximately 1,300 children a year.

Learn more about CASA of Travis County at www.casatavis.org or 512.459.2272.

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