

Get to Know Your Neighbors

by Larry Carlton



Jodie Rothman, a VR resident since December 2015, retired after 28 years as an elementary school teacher in the inner city of Patterson, New Jersey. For almost three years, she's been a volunteer *Guardian ad Litem* (GAL), and is a trained, court appointed advocate for the interests of abused, abandoned, or neglected children involved in dependency court proceedings.

What is a Guardian Ad Litem?

It is an organization of volunteers that advocates for children that are abused or neglected, petitioned into the court system by the Department of Social Services. GAL advocates are people like you or me from the community who volunteer to represent and advocate for a child's best interest.

How did you become involved in GAL?

I taught for many years, and some of those children needed special attention. There was nothing provided for them. Having been a school teacher, I still wanted to be involved with children and give back to the community after I retired.

Will you continue to volunteer with GAL?

Yes, I've been doing this for 3 years, and I've had children that have already been adopted, gone through foster homes, and I also have children in a home with parents that are neglectful and incarcerated. Knowing you make a difference in a child's life makes me want to continue and be there for many more children.

As an advocate are you appointed by the courts?

You become an advocacy from the court. I am given a Child Advocate Manager and GAL lawyer to work with, and they contact me when there is a child in my area that needs a GAL. There are classes that have to be taken; you are required to visit once a month. I write reports, go to meetings with the Judges, and give testimony because you are involved in all aspects of their life.

You can see them in school, talk to the teachers, counselors, and help with anything that needs to be done for them. They can reach me any time. I think that's very important. I go every week to their school or their home.

Is there a training program?

There's classroom training and online training. You visit a child a minimum of every 30 days and collaborate with other agencies for child care. You make recommendations to the court and prepare reports. At the beginning everyone works with another GAL who helps you through working with your first child.

Was there any event in your life that influenced your decision to volunteer with GAL?

I always had certain children that touched my heart, usually more than one, and these kids were my kids; they weren't only their parent's kids. The children that needed the most help, I tried to get someone to advocate for them so they could get the help they needed.

Have these children changed your life?

Yes. The first child I worked with I still keep in touch with. I keep in contact with every child I've had. They want to be with you because you helped them so much. They can go on and be your best friend.

What are you most proud of?

To be able to give back to the community. To stand up and speak up for the kids when they need it most. Having a relationship that will always be there. Months later I can get a text message from the child, or the parent, just to touch base and let me know what's going on.

Jodie Rothman