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5 graduate child advocacy program

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By **APRIL M. HAVENS**

PASCAGOULA Jackson County's Court Appointed Special Advocates for children welcomed five new volunteers Monday afternoon.

CASA is an organization that takes on cases of abused and neglected children to act as an extra set of eyes and ears for the Jackson County Youth Court. CASA volunteers spend time with the children, their families and others, which helps them make recommendations for the child in court.

The new volunteers, who completed a rigorous 30-hour training period, bring the number of volunteers to 30, said Executive Director Frances Allsup. Additionally, there are more than 10 Friends of CASA, volunteers who don't take cases but help the organization in other ways, such as events and fundraising.

Jackson County's local chapter has "been the forerunner in recruitment over the last two years," said state director Laurie Johnson, and local volunteers clocked 5,600 hours of service in the first five months of this year.

CASA is always looking for volunteers or "everyday heroes," Allsup said because the group can only take on as many cases as the number of volunteers allow.

New volunteer Lynda Knight, a retired Ocean Springs elementary schoolteacher, said she missed working with children and decided to join after hearing about the program at a church meeting.

"There's such a need," Knight said. "The social workers don't have enough time to cover it effectively, and I think a lot of children are falling through the cracks. But this will assist and let the judges know what is going on."

Knight, who taught for 27 years prior to her retirement in 2000, was exposed to "very few" children in these type of court situations, "but I pick up the paper every day and read what's happening now," she said. "There seems to such a need for it, and it looks like it's getting worse."

Renee Lee of Pascagoula said she was considering fostering children when she learned about the CASA program through a Mississippi Press newspaper article.

She decided the program was for her because it "is very organized and really looks out for the children," she said. "I feel like we can't choose our parents or the situations we're born into, so those children need to know somebody cares about them."

"I look forward to seeing the moment when a child realizes, 'I have a chance, and I matter,'" Lee

said.

Other volunteers who took the oath Monday were John Braudis, Shelly Ferguson and Elizabeth Lassere.

Also at Monday's class induction at the B.E. "Mac" McGinty Civic Center, CASA announced that United Way will help pay the salary of a new part-time volunteer coordinator, and Singing River Electric Power Association awarded it a \$1,850 Neighbors Helping Neighbors grant for the new employee's office equipment. Additionally, the Ocean Springs Rotary Club awarded CASA a \$1,000 grant.

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