



Walk for Hope brings awareness to child abuse

Sunday, April 13, 2008

By AMBER CRAIG

OCEAN SPRINGS -- Volunteers at the forefront of helping abused and neglected children find safe homes hope that one day their services will no longer be needed.

But until that day, awareness will bring more community involvement and that will bring more help to children who have been hurt, said organizers of the first Walk for Hope sponsored by Jackson County Court Appointed Special Advocates Saturday morning.

CASA is an organization that operates through the Jackson County Services Coalition and assigns trained volunteers to speak in the court system for children who have been neglected or abused.

Volunteers study a child's situation and act as an objective voice in court, with the ultimate goal being to move the child through the court system and into a safe, permanent living environment.

More than 100 people walked from the Biloxi side to the Ocean Springs Yacht Club, where speakers involved in some way with CASA shared their thoughts at a "rally for hope."

Youth Court Judge Sharon Sigalas told the crowd that just last week she saw an 18-month-old with bruises all over his body, "and all he knew was pain."

"We never get used to it," Sigalas said of those who work with abused and neglected children. "You never understand why it happens."

The idea for the first Walk for Hope was born just a month ago, said Frances Allsup, CASA program director. The event coincides with National Child Abuse Prevention and Awareness Month.

"I would have never thought that this small walk would have come to this," Allsup told the crowd of more than 100 after the walk.

CASA always needs volunteers, Allsup said. In 2007, 1,600 cases were referred to CASA. The organization could only take on 40 of those cases because there weren't enough volunteers, Allsup said. In addition, many of the volunteers hold full time jobs. CASA has 28 volunteers.

"It is the volunteers who make this program," Allsup said. "They volunteer for the best interest of the child, and all I do is try to help them."

Allsup said her main goal this year is to bring more awareness of the prevalence of child abuse in Jackson County. People often don't know the signs of child abuse, and they don't realize that it happens in their neighborhoods or even to children they know, Allsup said.

"A lot of people don't realize it happens in their backyard," Allsup said.

Sigalas asked for people to consider becoming a CASA volunteer or supporter and, if nothing else, to keep abused children at the forefront of their minds.

"If you would, every night when you close your eyes, pray for these children of Jackson County," Sigalas said.

Reporter Amber Craig can be reached at acraig@themississippipress.com or 228-934-1428.

Want to help?

For details about how to become a Court Appointed Special Advocates volunteer, contact Frances Allsup at 228-762-7370 or visit www.jccasa.net. To learn how to recognize the signs of child abuse or neglect, visit: www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/signs.cfm.

Copyright 2008 gulflive.com. All Rights Reserved.