

Transcription for Episode 15 - Understanding Guardian Ad Litem - Who is Who

Cat 0:01

This is cat, and I'm here with Jack and today we have a very special guest. This is Trisha, with the guardian ad litem program in Florida, so Trisha, let me ask you a very serious question. What is your favorite drink at Starbucks.

Trisha 0:17

I always have to say tea. I'm not a coffee drinker.

Cat 0:20

Oh, really well. Me too. What kind of tea do you like?

Trisha 0:23

Always English breakfast tea. Oh, a bit of milk.

Cat 0:26

That sounds really good, I'll have to try that sometime,

Jack 0:29

Trisha, can you tell me what your role of a gal entail?

Trisha 0:33

So a gal is a court appointed volunteer who is to represent the best interests of the children.

Jack 0:42

okay and what does that look like on the everyday like what types of things do you do, I know you do a lot more than you're probably responsible for, for my experience with you but you know what it what are the main functions?

Trisha 0:55

So we're very similar to case management, but obviously, first of all we're volunteers we gather paperwork, we get school records medical records we meet with the parents, foster parents, the children, and personally I try and develop a relationship with the children so that I can represent them and understand the place that they're in, and what would be best for them, whether that means they need extra curricular activities or tutoring from school,

regular things that you would do for your own children.

Jack 1:27

Right and that's we had an entire episode really where we talked primarily about the guardian ad litem program. And one of the things that we talked about is you know your role in advocating for the child is so important to have a relationship with the child, and a lot of the times you see guardian ad litem don't really do that, it's like they're checking off boxes instead of treating relationship and when you have a guardian ad litem like yourself, that creates relationships with the kids like, that's when they're going to open up to you and tell you, you know how they really feel about things and what they really need and you can really make an impact in their life.

Cat 2:03

Yeah, I feel like the kids that are really getting what they need to have really good guiding items, so thank you so much for doing what you do. Can I ask you what was your first experience with foster care how did to learn about foster care and where the need was?

Trisha 2:19

So my children's school always did the Christmas drive. Okay, so we would receive lists from The Guardian Ad Litem program and it had a child's name or obviously several children's names, and it had their wish list, okay, which was always a phenomenal wish list and he thought, gosh, that's a big list. And so as a school or classes we would go out and buy gifts for them and the entire gymnasium would be filled with gifts.

Cat 2:45

That's just like I just warms my heart.

Jack 2:48

Yeah, that's really sweet.

Trisha 2:49

The Guardians would come and pick up these massive piles of gifts, and deliver them to the children, but we never saw anything after the purchase of the gifts. And when you're they were trying to recruit more guardians, yeah. And so it really started there.

Cat 3:04

Okay and that's when you first is that when you joined,

Trisha 3:07

Okay. That was almost eight years ago.

Cat 3:10

Oh my gosh. How many kids do you think you've had total in those eight years,

Trisha 3:15

probably well over, 30 By now

Cat 3:17

wow wow oh my goodness, that's a lot.

Jack 3:21

Knowing how much work you put into your role as a guardian. That is so much more.

Thank you can possibly imagine.

Trisha 3:31

so much short term, but yeah this is like my first case I still talk to those children, I still have relationships, almost eight years later.

Cat 3:41

That's awesome, that's amazing because kids just they need people who love them. Yeah, they need long term relationships, I'm sure they'd benefit so much from that. Did you know any foster kids growing up?

Trisha 3:51

My brother's adopted. And when we were, I guess I must have been in third or fourth grade, my parents fostered. Oh they did three children. Wow, so it was a set of twin boys, they must, I can't, I'm trying to remember their ages, elementary school and their sister. I guess that would have been my first fostercare experience.

Jack 4:12

Oh you were a foster sibling, really cool. Do you, do you remember much about it or was it kind of before.

Trisha 4:19

I remember, it would end we only have this one set of children, it was, you know, it was one of those things with the churches seemed to push it occasionally. And obviously my parents church and said hey we're doing this fostering thing and become licensed fosters, so my parents did all that and we then moved in these three children that were different

than us.

Trisha 4:42

The boys had some issues that the food hoarding some of the rent some exceptional behaviors, but no I very clearly remembered I remember at one was Easter, one year, and we had a swimming pool out back and there were four of us siblings and like we had brought in these.

Jack 5:01

You say you were seven, like my seven right now.

Trisha 5:05

And we got new bikes for Eastern Europe. So put out Yeah, and then when you think about it later you're like really, you weren't concerned about bike. Yeah. But yeah, they stayed with us probably nine months.

Cat 5:20

Oh my goodness, like

Jack 5:21

that's a full, you know, long term, placement

Cat 5:24

your adopted brother was one of those kids,

Trisha 5:27

he was not, no. years ago, my brother's 50 Now, it was much easier to adopt children, and my parents just basically applied to an agency and they said, Oh, we have this boy he's become available, do you want to adoption, years ago so. How old was he, he was, was they told us he was two months old, but it was actually only a month. Oh wow, because he actually found his actual birth certificate later. May has birthday in June when he was actually born in May.

Jack 6:00

Can you give me one word that you think people would use to describe a guardian ad litem?

Trisha 6:05

I would hope that we would be crucial to the children. Yeah, I think that guardian ad litem

are crucial to the children.

Jack 6:15

Yeah, absolutely. And it always blows me away when kids don't have Guardian items, especially when those oftentimes are the cases where they're really needed. How do you see the role of the guardian ad litem in child welfare and the big picture.

Trisha 6:30

Unfortunately, in regards to the system, and our role, I would say it's almost insignificant. We want to talk about the kids being important, and we represent their best interests. Unfortunately, when you get into the court, and you get into the case of plans. It's never about the children, it's always about the parents,

Jack 6:52

Which is very true because you know that's one of the things I think was so surprising to me when I became a foster parent and started going to court, is that sometimes you would have an entire court hearing, where not one thing was mentioned about the child. And it was just reviewing the parents case plan. And I think to have such a super focus on the parent did not consider what that child is going through, and that child's experiences, very small picture,

Cat 7:23

who are the partners that you interact with, like within the system, outside the system. And how does that collaboration work.

Trisha 7:31

So everybody from case management on up through that organization, the attorneys at The Guardian Ad Litem program, there's actually paid people like me at The Guardian Ad Litem program, and they have lots of, you know, volunteers on them so interact with them. We're not allowed any direct contact with any attorneys. Okay, the assistant state's attorney, or the parents attorneys, just like a regular legal system so if I wanted to talk to mom's attorney if I had a question or something. I'm not allowed to do that, that's interesting I did not have that. Okay.

Jack 8:06

Yeah. So, at The Guardian program in each case kind of gets assigned a team, right, so there's you and then who else is on it, so that would be me and then my supervisor, and an attorney, so your supervisor is the cam right correct, and that is a paid employee of the Guardian program correct. So it's the attorney working for The Guardian program, your

supervisor who was the cam, and then you the volunteer guardian ad litem so those three individuals are assigned to a case yes,

Cat 8:38

I've always been like, well, especially in the last I'd say a year and a half, really an are some of the advocacy that guardian ad litem do, especially the really good ones I know you are a really good one. I'd had a guardian ad litem, I like to do all the legwork to get a child and VPK. Yeah, I've has our. Yeah. Which means, like, you know, I had, you know, had one recently that, you know, scheduled an appointment for me and for her and the foster mom to all meet at the school to make sure that the teacher knew about all the behaviors that the child had, you know what's really required a lot of organizational skills, and proactive thinking I hadn't even thought about doing that, you know, getting him a 504 She's the educational advocate, anytime, as a therapist I mentioned what what's going on, she will order the toys that she feels like would be helpful. She's ordered. Thinking of frames photos of the kids parents, I am just always in awe of all the things that Guardian items will do to advocate for a child, what does it been like for you to advocate for our child whether

Trisha 9:46

it be like in court or in other ways, it is the most rewarding part because we don't always, although we represent their best interests, what we sometimes think are their best interest, doesn't come to fruition, or you're waiting so long and just the waiting is never in the children's best and that's a case that's opened two years or three years or four years. And yeah, it's so when you can advocate for something that they actually need, whether that's completing this Social Security paperwork. That is a monstrous task, because no you knowing that they're getting that Social Security is beneficial for them, or advocating for a Doss for and test the need for a specialized doctor, or a behavioral therapist, or, you know, a walker for a child that can't walk, and whether we get that through funding from the guardian ad litem Foundation, or from their social security they happen to have that you feel that you're improving their life. Oh you are,

Cat 10:48

yeah, yeah, you know like the stages of development that all the kids go through and we it's important for us to know them because then we understand what kids are doing you know. Did you guys ever learn about the Erikson stage of development when you took like developmental psychology or child development or anything. I was in school, a long time ago so I didn't. Well I always remember I always remember this one because it stuck with me because for some reason I always thought child development was important but then I, you know, found it to be irrelevant after they were 18 you know that there's the stages of development, when you're like 40 to 65 That's it, it's the need to give and the need to

contribute and the need to know that you gave back and, you know, you get some of that by giving to your kids, but, you then need to give to your community and to know that when you leave this world that you made a difference. I definitely think that you have done that, the kids I

Jack 11:40

know it's not going to brag on herself but I can brag on her a little bit because I don't think I've ever seen a guardian, go to the extent that she has gone to, you know, when she is assigned to a case those kids are her kids, forget about having meetings with a teacher, this woman was driving kids to school. Oh my god yes, because she wanted to make sure they can continue going to the program that they did when they moved to a different place,

Trisha 12:05

just being in their life it's being that constant person that says, I'm not leaving. Yeah, you are stuck with me and I told this to the girl on my first case, it stuck with me and so I expect being invited to your graduation to your wedding. You know during their soccer games yeah when there's movies, so they know they have a person,

Cat 12:26

which is, like, stability, and someone else who loves them. Yeah, you can't have too many people that love you, you can't. And these, you know, you really can't have enough stability there,

Jack 12:36

especially when you've experienced trauma like that resiliency is rebuilt for relationships. Yeah and having these like healthy adult relationships in their life is so important and especially when you have a guardian like Trisha who like, really makes that child feel like they're so loved. And that's important because, you know, especially some of these kids they think the only person that will ever love me. Is this one person and that person may have failed me in some way so how am I ever going to allow anybody else to love me. Yeah, and the way that this woman loves their kids is like a breakthrough that, you know. So what do you want foster parents to know about Guardian enlightens.

Trisha 13:21

I think foster parents, once they get to know their guardian, understand that they can go to them and we are, we can be an aid to them in aid to their children. And a lot of foster parents are so new and are just kind of thrown to the wolves. Yeah, we have a wealth of information and more much easier to get ahold of in your case manager who has, you

know, probably 50 kids, maybe 60 Kids Yeah, most Guardian enlightens have one set of children, and they've been with them for a long time,

Jack 13:52

and that's actually something that you were speaking to on a previous episode CAD is about how a lot of the times when you meet a kid, they've had so many case managers, but they've always had the same guardian ad litem so when you need some reliable information that Guardian is laid on is the person who's able to. Yeah, that's the case. Usually, what are some basic things that foster parents can do to work better with their guardian,

Trisha 14:19

keep in regular contact with us, let us know that you know hey we're going out of town, can you make sure that we have a travel order Jenny has a dentist appointment on this day. Do you have any records from when she went. Previously, we're, we have a wealth of information. So you just have to ask us for it because sometimes we don't know that they need it.

Jack 14:41

So when you work with the other partners like the case managers. Also, the foster parents, you know, the attorneys, obviously it's like third party but also amongst the team yourself like what are the biggest communication struggles between the various partners

Trisha 14:57

in case management is hard because they're always changing, they have a vast turnover, they do and they do represent, case managers, and they're all They're overwhelmed, many of them that come in this is their first job, and they are given whatever training they're given say a month training, and then they're handed a caseload of children. It's seems that there's some tension between case management, and guardian ad litem when in actual fact we're both really doing the same job, ours as a guardian ad litem is smaller, we don't have as many children, not paid, we have a little bit more free time most of us that are volunteering, we're not the bad people, we're trying to help you. We can run around the doctor's office and get reports we can go to schools, we can give you an update on the children that we've known for two years and yeah just walked into. We should work more collaboratively. We just don't seem to do that on a regular basis,

Jack 15:57

I feel like sometimes case managers think that a guardian. And obviously, you know, I don't want to paint a broad brush but I often have I think I've even actually heard a case

manager say one time that you know to add a guardian to the program, it's just creating more work for them and making things harder sometimes if the guardian ad litem doesn't agree with what they want to do, then maybe that's, you know, making their job more difficult and, you know, making it harder for them to accomplish for that kid what they want to accomplish. When in actuality, I feel like a guardian ad litem is often obviously not always but often able to make their job, I mean, would you work with a case manager, they could probably sit back and take a siesta

Cat 16:41

and break it and I let them sit there. However, there are some that are not so good, and that's probably what they're thinking of, I know I have a funny story I worked with one once who we did have a good relationship but in the beginning, it was not so good, and as a therapist, and I've been a therapist, off and on for a long time I took a little break for a couple years like maybe two years. And one of the first times she called me, she said, you probably didn't know this, but it's your job is a therapist to supervise visits between the parents and the child, and that is actually not my job. But I was happy to do it, it was not a problem, like it's just one hour out of my entire week, and it was like helpful for me like I was able to build rapport with the child, I was able to gain a lot of insights. And I, I said I am happy to do it, you know, on a short term basis and that you know, but I was just laughing because I was like gosh you're very manipulative person and you know, and so I said, Yeah, I'm happy to do it for a few weeks until you guys find someone else to do it and so I would imagine those are the kinds of things. So thinking of.

Trisha 17:44

It is a shame that the two parties can work together better if we could be much more productive, I think, and move cases along more quickly come to a conclusion much sooner. If we actually work together, And if it was actually about the parents and the children,

Cat 18:04

and not just the parents, and sometimes you are going to have a different opinion, of course, because that's your job right, yes. And maybe it's important for the child

Jack 18:11

for all of those opinions to be heard. It is, yeah, I always find it interesting when I go to court and you know I feel like, in reality, the, the two people, usually, who know the child best is going to be the caregiver. But also, if you know if you have a gal like Trisha here it's also going to be the gal like the case that you know we shared. I don't know that anybody knew that child better than you and I, at least for the time she was in my house. Yes. And

then you go to court, and everybody has heard from and sometimes her and I are the only ones really not heard from, and you know that just speaks to how the focus is not really on the child as much and every once in a while I'll go to court and the judge will be like oh you see the caregivers here and you know how's the kid doing but, you know, nobody's really paying attention to what you say or taking much stock in that. And, you know, if we're all here for the kids, then maybe that's and maybe I'm not always right and maybe I don't always have the full picture of what's going on with the parents, but maybe my input or Patricia's input is a valuable addition to the equation,

Cat 19:25

it is valuable because caregiver is not a babysitter. And just because the guardian ad litem is not paid to something their insights are not valuable, either, so that's a shame.

Jack 19:35

So the partner that you work with the most is probably the case manager, you probably don't often work with licensing because that's kind of, on the other side of the foster family, etc, and you're not allowed to really interact directly with the attorneys, or the judge Are you allowed to interact directly with the judge other than in court. No. Okay, so basically we're talking about the partners that the guardian ad litem works with as the case managers. So, what do you want case managers to know about guardian ad litem.

Trisha 20:05

We would love to help you. We were volunteering, we are almost at your disposal, and we'd be happy to do. I mean I've dropped off referrals, I've driven parents to appointments. I've dropped them off at par. I've done sibling visits, there's a lot of things that we will do to assist you just have to ask us, What do you want the public to know about guardian ad litem, we always need more guardian of items that, yeah, to represent children's best interests,

Cat 20:40

what keeps you from being dated burnt out, what keeps you from losing focus on the end goal, because you've had some cases that have lasted a long time. It's been really difficult.

Trisha 20:51

I think about once every three or four months I say, Okay, that's it, I'm done. I'm just going to see these children that I have, I'm going to see their case to the end and then I'm going to retire because clearly I'm not. My mind's not in the right place anymore. And then those children I still have, and there's no way that I could leave my children. Yeah, so as long as I have an open case with open children that need me. I have to say for them. Yeah. Even if I

don't get what I think is in their best interest, they know that I was there till the end. I mean, having you is in their best interest.

Jack 21:30

So and that's anytime she's ever said that to me. What I tell her is, You know, the system is not. The system can be a monster, the system can be disheartening, the system can make you lose hope, but when you have people like Tricia, helping in the system, then there is hope for the kids and so, you know there's kids that need her. And trust me, I haven't had my run especially lately with some Gardena items that I wouldn't necessarily write a recommendation for so to have amazing passionate guardian ad litem so the system is very important. What I wanted to ask you about is something that all of us in child welfare experience regardless of where we sit on that spectrum is we all have secondary trauma from the kids that we work with, and having that secondary trauma, often gives us trauma fatigue, which is where you start feeling like depressed, nobody has different symptoms I, I know that trauma fatigue is sinking in when I am crying a lot. Often, if I'm in court, I'll start crying. Hearing about other cases, and what's going on with these other kids, so when I see that happening, you know, I try and line up some self care stuff to get me back into it. What is your experience with having the secondary trauma from your kids and what self care, do you do to put yourself in the right place.

Trisha 22:57

I usually end up taking on more children. Oh my gosh, they need a guardian I better volunteer myself. But, trying not to do that so much. I work out. And I, you know, try and spend a day where not that I don't think about them but I don't do anything on the case. Yeah, you take a break, you take one day out of the whole year. One day your phone's always on people are always testing you, they're always a parent or a child or a foster parents, or a relative caregiver.

Trisha 23:39

They don't know that you're a volunteer and so of course you're not working nine to five, and of course I answer my phone, but when I'm old enough those days. I just don't answer, what are the biggest struggles that you have faced as a guardian ad litem, it's probably a personal struggle but me thinking I know what's best, and really trying to fight for that for the children and make the case about the children will say being railroaded but just being you come up to a roadblock, and there's nothing you can do, because the parents are just given war time which everybody says is unexplainable or so unusual or gosh I never heard that happening before or I don't know why that case is open for four years and just feeling defeated. Yeah.

Jack 24:31

I mean, I would imagine, I think, legally in the state of Florida. a case is supposed to be a year, federal federal federal Okay, so in the entire country. There's a federal law saying occasion take one year to reach permanency, and I, I make maybe one case I've seen that short. I know that we've talked about the the judge up in North Florida who is taking some really proactive creative strategies in order to accomplish that, but rarely does that happen and when you have a case that's going on for four years with no end in sight,

Cat 25:10

like the life of a child like 18 years of childhood. It may take four years of that, it's like almost 25%.

Trisha 25:20

Different house after different house not through any fault of anybody's, but just life circumstances that have caused them to from this foster parent or from that relative caregiver, or from this potential forever home. And, I mean the trauma all those times of being rejected, or being removed, and a year in their life in their mind is so much longer than an hour, I mean, you know how long did it take to get to your birthday every year to cover. And now when you're old in our age you're like oh my gosh, she just had a birthday. Yeah.

Jack 26:01

What do you think the community can do to prevent more kids coming into care. In reality, there's

Trisha 26:07

probably kids that should be in care, that aren't that aren't right exactly as a community, I mean you have to keep an eye on your neighbors, you have to offer community support, you have to have a place where people can go for outreach, I think summer camps would be good enough to help people with their children, not just abandon them, you know schools over now what do I do with my children for 16 weeks. I've been asking about every morning

Cat 26:36

I called Jack yesterday and said what are you doing and my kids come over. That's real life is your life. Yeah, and if you don't

Trisha 26:43

have family support, and you don't have community support, I don't know where you turn

to.

Jack 26:47

Well and I think that we see, there are certain cultures within our community that have more of a multi generational living situation I agree and I think when you see that family support all in the same home. You don't see kids from those cultures coming into foster care because their family wraps around them. I'm not saying I want my parents or my husband's parents, moving in with me let me. I love them but I love to visit them in their homes and but I think that there's something to be said for that and if we had more of that in all of our cultures, then I think that that can help kids not need to come into foster care as much.

Cat 27:33

I think so too. I think we might see evidence of that, you know, Miami is like the biggest highest population highest population and they are at number six in removals.

Jack 27:42

Yeah, we have more kids in foster care than Miami area. As shocking, think about how rural we are even

Trisha 27:51

to think about how many people immigrate here. You know not a lot of people were born in Florida. And so I think lots of people from your other states arrive come to Florida looking for a new life. Yeah, you don't have family. Yeah, we don't all live right next door to each other. Yeah, that's totally

Jack 28:08

true. I know on the individual level that you're making big changes in our community with each kid that you're advocating for, but I also know that you know you are always the first one to volunteer and, you know, you heard about an event that an organization I work with was doing last year and was like, How can I help, how can I help. So, tell me what your goals are, what, what do you want to do in your life to make our community better.

Trisha 28:41

Obviously, children are a passion that I see is underrepresented, So yes I volunteered at your event it was involving children of course it was foster children, the business that we own we do fundraisers there, and they're all children based whether it's books or socks and underwear or clothes drive, it's just trying to do a little bit for one person at a time, really because and I'm quite happy to do it quietly. But you know that you've made it a

little difference in that person's life,

Cat 29:13

I think, big difference. Yeah, thanks so much for being with us today and I appreciate it. It gives me hope to have all these good people on our show.

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