

Abused children can't wait

Six-year-old Adrian's parents were locked in a battle of depression, anger and domestic violence. After a major fight in their home, police were called and Adrian was sent to live with his grandmother. Complicating matters, the entire family spoke no English but were desperate for change.

Dallas CASA advocate Maritza Garcia, a native Spanish speaker, was assigned to advocate for Adrian's best interests while in the protective care of Child Protective Services. From the first day she met him, she saw the love he had for his parents. And from the moment she first spoke Spanish to his grandmother, the entire family embraced her.

An advocate since 2012, Maritza says it's the cultural connection she can make with families as much as her language skills that has been critical. When a child is removed from home, CPS' preference is to place the child with a kinship caregiver, a family member who can serve as temporary caregiver while parents work through their court-ordered services.

"Being able to explain issues from a cultural perspective has been even more helpful than speaking Spanish," she said. "Sometimes legal terms or legal processes don't translate well if the caregiver is unfamiliar with the process. Explaining concepts in ways that relate to their daily lives has been the key to my advocacy. Understanding the caregivers, their perspectives and their culture allows me to make the connection they need to become their own advocates."

In three out of four of her cases, children went to live with grandparents who struggled to understand what CPS needed them to do. A graduate student, Maritza has been so moved by what she's seen she based a class project on ways to improve communication with caregivers.

"Finding information on kinship care is difficult for grandmothers who only have access to the CPS website through their cell phones," Maritza said. "The idea is to give the kinship caregiver, who has not had the same training as a foster parent, a place to start."

She's working on a plan that would address the most important issues kinship caregivers face such as finding daycare, medical services, the court process and the role of kinship caregiver. Ultimately, her dream is an online resource available to the public in English, Spanish, Vietnamese and Arabic which she thinks would empower kinship caregivers.

For six-year-old Adrian, Maritza's advocacy allowed the entire family to embrace counseling. Over a period of months, Adrian and both of his parents attended regular individual and group counseling sessions. Ultimately, his parents made the changes necessary for Adrian to return home. Months later, Maritza was leaving a restaurant with her own family when she saw Adrian and his parents.

"That little boy was so excited to see me," she said. "From his booth, he waved at me and smiled like I had never before seen him smile."

“At the beginning of the case, he wouldn’t talk sometimes. He always looked sad and would sometimes hide his tears. But that evening when I saw him smile at me, I knew I had helped make a difference in his life and the lives of his parents.”

