

For 12 years of life, Elena knew only abuse and molestation, confusion and abandonment, conflict and anger. But when Dallas CASA advocate Karen took on Elena's challenging and complex case, something changed for both of them.

"She's just an amazing young lady with what it takes to overcome her past," Karen said. "She's been through more than any child should ever have to go through, but from the get go I saw something in this young lady that was so resilient, so willing to talk and be open. She moved me."

Since being matched with Karen, Elena has a dependable adult she can rely on for the first time in her life. And Karen, an experienced advocate for infants and toddlers, has discovered a real gift for empowering teenagers to help themselves.

Karen's CASA supervisor says Karen and Elena had a special rapport from the start.

"I knew they would be great together," the supervisor said. "They're both friendly, talkative, lovable people, and Karen really shines as an advocate."

Removed from their birth home by Child Protective Services due to sexual violence, physical abuse, neglect and drug use in the home, Elena and three of her siblings were placed in a foster situation that eventually led to adoption. But Elena, scarred by her birth family's years of abuse and her subsequent lack of adequate counseling, refused the adoption. She then found herself in psychological crisis, repeatedly hospitalized and headed toward an involuntary treatment center without the resources Elena needed. She needed someone on her side.

With Karen working behind the scenes, Elena was temporarily placed in a residential treatment center where she receives counseling and guidance, education and the structure she needs in a safe environment surrounded by good role models. Karen worked with CASA, the judicial system and CPS to make the best possible placement for Elena's unique needs.

Much to everyone's delight, Elena has blossomed at the treatment center, making good grades, running 5K races, tending animals at the facility's barn and earning privileges like a trip to the beach. Through counseling, she has even begun to warm to the idea of letting go of her painful, abusive past and being adopted by her foster family.

She calls Karen, hungry for a connection to home and happy to share good news and progress she's making in treatment. And Karen, like no one else Elena has known, always answers.