

Abused children can't wait

At age 30 with five children, Sky's mother was not able to provide for her children. So along with her four siblings, Sky lived with her great-grandparents in a five-bedroom house in Oak Cliff. Her great-grandfather, a pastor, provided for the family financially, and extended relatives nearby helped care for the children. Sky remembers walking to kindergarten with her aunts and a houseful of children coming and going.

"At my great-grandparents' house, we had to be home at a certain time and dinner was on the table at a certain time," she said. "We didn't like their structure and their rules until we didn't have any structure or rules. Then we missed them."

Sky was only eight when her world came crashing down. After an altercation between her great-grandmother and her mother, Sky and her siblings moved in with their mother in South Dallas. It may have only been 15 minutes away from her great-grandparents' home, but Sky says it was a world apart.

"I just remember it was a dirty, messy lifestyle," Sky said. "There was clutter everywhere, and we weren't always fed."

Sky took on the care of her baby brother, who was nine months old when they went to live with her mother.

"I didn't know how to change a diaper, but I did it," she said. "And, really, it's nothing but the grace of God that kept me from feeding him spoiled milk. I was a child. I didn't know."

Child Protective Services soon became involved.

"There was this lady who showed up at school and at home asking me all sorts of questions about if there's food at home and if I took a bath at night. I thought she was there to get me in trouble and I didn't want people getting involved in my business."

Soon, it felt to Sky like the lady was trying to tear her family apart. Sky's older sister with intellectual disabilities was sent to a group home; her two younger brothers moved to foster care and her younger sister was sent to her paternal grandfather. Sky's life was in turmoil. She remembers at least two different foster homes, the death of her great-grandparents and a placement with an aunt unprepared for life with a young girl.

Much changed when Dallas CASA volunteer Larry Dolan got involved.

"With Larry, there weren't questions about what I ate for dinner or if my mom hit me," she said. "He just cared about me. He'd take me to get ice cream and hang out and ask me about what happened at school."

Larry still serves as a Dallas CASA volunteer advocate today. He's taken 43 cases involving 103 children and has no plans to stop. He remembers Sky as a frightened, scared little girl. Sky and her siblings were his fourth case and Dallas CASA was assigned late in the case. Larry tried to do what he could to move

the process along for Sky. He remembers picking Sky up from school weekly to take her to counseling and stopping for ice cream on the way back.

“In all my cases, I try to get those things moving that for some reason have been delayed,” Larry said. “I try to use humor and be authentic and then follow through so things happen. Kids are all special but I guess I have a soft spot for the underdog.”

For Sky, life after CPS involvement continued to be a challenge. She returned to her mother’s care at age 12, but she struggled living in a home with a mother who was virtually a stranger.

“I felt like CPS had ruined my life,” she said. “I remember not liking people – not anyone. I had behavior problems and my mom was calling the police on me constantly.”

But memories of her time with her great-grandparents and caring people like Larry, as well as her passion for education spurred her forward. Sky graduated from high school and has worked in banking in Dallas for four years. Her younger sister is a student at Howard University, and the baby Sky helped raise graduated from high school this spring.

She credits everyone involved – CPS, Larry Dolan, her extended family – with loving her in times of peace as well as in times of trouble.

“If it weren’t for all of them, I would not have graduated high school. My sister wouldn’t be in college,” she said. “They wanted what was best for me versus what I wanted. They weren’t just trying to mess up my family. They were trying to help me.

“There’s nothing wrong with community intervention when something’s not going right. Intervention is what changed everything for me.”

So now Sky is back at Dallas CASA. After completing 30 hours of volunteer training plus courtroom observations, Sky is now a sworn advocate and just took her first case. The opportunity to help a child like herself propels her forward now.

“Experience is the best teacher and boy have I been there,” Sky said.

