



Alice Barthel - Giving every troubled child a voice

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Alice Barthel of the Laboratory's Computational Physics and Methods group sits patiently at a table while waiting for a child, one of the more than 2,000 children in New Mexico who are part of the foster-care system. Sadly, these children may well have suffered abuse or neglect in their lives.

Barthel is a CASA, a Court-Appointed Special Advocate, for the New Mexico First District Court. The acronym also happens to mean "home" in Spanish. Her role is to serve as a child's primary advocate, speaking for a child during child-welfare cases and helping abused and neglected children reach safe and permanent homes.

"I started this type of child-advocate volunteer work while pursuing my PhD in Australia at the University of New South Wales," Barthel explains. "I found that serving as a child's advocate made a big difference to the children I assisted. When I moved to Los Alamos to accept a postdoctoral position at the Laboratory in 2017, I immediately reached out to CASA First to continue this rewarding work."

Formed in 1995, CASA First supports 60 volunteers who work for Santa Fe, Rio Arriba and Los Alamos counties. After 30 hours of training, Barthel became a CASA for the First District Court in March 2018.

"We are the eyes of the court and the voice of the child," she says. "I am that consistent adult in their lives, following them through the court system until they either return home or are transitioned to an adoptive home."

Being a CASA volunteer consists of gathering the most up-to-date information about a child's situation. It includes visiting a child once a month, as well as regular meetings with parents and foster parents, and the range of teachers, lawyers, social workers, medical personnel and therapists involved in a case. A CASA files reports to the case's judge during review sessions to ensure that each child under the state's care is safe and receives all the necessary services.

These reports contain a status of the child's development and well-being, as well as recommendations for improvement and any concerns encountered during the review period. By providing this information, CASAs help make difficult decisions about what's in a child's best interest.

Getting to know a child

One of the more challenging parts of being a CASA volunteer is dealing with difficult cases. “Some of these situations are hard,” Barthel explains. “We follow cases with substantiated abuse or neglect, and often, CASA volunteers are appointed to the most complex cases, because these children are in dire need.”

Getting to know and gain a child’s trust can be challenging, and Barthel says that each CASA volunteer has a different approach, one dependent on the child’s age.

“These children often have parents who struggle in being consistent, usually because they have a lot of stressors in their lives,” she says. “Being consistently there for such children, even when they don’t want to see you, pays off in the long run because they feel free to express themselves around you, sharing the good and the bad.”

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