A close-up portrait of Judge Glenda Hatchett. She has short, dark hair with bangs and is smiling warmly at the camera. She is wearing a black blazer with a bright red lining. The background is a textured, light-colored wall.

JUDGE GLENDA HATCHETT

NATIONAL SPOKESPERSON FOR THE
NATIONAL CASA ASSOCIATION

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GIVING A VOICE TO OUR CHILDREN

By Nikitta A. Foston

“It was during this time that God acknowledged my sorrows and sent me an angel,” says 24 year-old Duke University graduate student, Kadia Edwards. “I learned that love comes in all shapes, colors and forms and that I could trust people.”

For Edwards, a former ward of the state of Connecticut, that lesson didn't come easy. After nearly 10 years in an over-crowded foster care system, including a litany of foster homes, group homes, shelters, high schools and a rapidly declining sense of self esteem, Edwards became settled in the notion that family and all the trappings therein – stability, acceptance, self-worth, self-love, support and encouragement – was an entity reserved for other people, not someone like her.

That is, until a woman named Carmen, a “Guardian ad Litem” (GAL), also referred to as a “court-appointed-special-advocate” (CASA), came into her life and turned it upside down. “They say that actions speak louder than words,” Edwards adds. “Carmen’s action of remaining a permanent fixture in my life continues to teach me that I am worth someone’s love.”

Carmen Effron, and thousands more volunteers like her, have joined the ranks of average citizens – housewives, retirees, businessmen, students, bankers, teachers, stockbrokers, doctors and executives – who’ve decided to commit their energies, whether large or small, to become volunteer advocates for children. The 30 year-old organization that has brought this like-minded group together is the National Court Appointed Special Advocates Association, or simply said, CASA.

The goal? To give each of the 500,000 children in foster care a personalized voice to guide them through, and hopefully out, of over-burdened systems and into permanent homes. *The means?* Committed volunteers from across the country that are trained and appointed by the court to become “spokespersons” for the children they serve.

Is prior experience required? No. Do you need to be a lawyer? No. A paralegal? Not at all. A social worker? Judge? Do you need familiarity with the courts and the legal systems? *A resounding no to all.*

“The only requirement is that you care,” says Judge Glenda Hatchett, host of the nationally syndicated television series *Judge Hatchett* and National Spokesperson for CASA. “What we really need is ready hands, healthy hearts and concerned eyes. And while there are many organizations that help with the plight of child

A close-up portrait of Judge Glenda Hatchett, a Black woman with short, dark, wavy hair, smiling warmly. She is wearing a purple and white vertically striped collared shirt. The background is a textured, light-colored wall.

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welfare, only one empowers everyday citizens as appointed officers of the court to advocate for an abused child," Judge Hatchett told *Urban Influence*. "That organization is The National CASA Association."

CASA volunteers, who advocated for 225,000 children last year, are trained to act as first-hand experts on the individual needs of abused and neglected children in foster care, giving them the best possible chance of a hopeful future. After a thorough training and development program including 30 hours of pre-service training and 12 hours of yearly in-service training, volunteers are sworn in as Officers of the Court and are normally assigned one to two cases per year. As appointed members of the court, CASA volunteers:

- 1) Serve as fact-finders for the judge by thoroughly researching the background of the assigned case,
- 2) Speak on behalf of the child in the courtroom and,
- 3) Act as watchdogs for the child during the duration of the case, ensuring it is brought to a swift and appropriate conclusion.

Unlike a social worker, lawyer or judge, a CASA representative has a privileged position in a child's life because they often serve as the 'permanent link,' that connects the varied and often fractured components of a child's care. When "you go into a courtroom, you will see lawyers who know the law and have dozens of kids' files. You will see social workers who know the regulations and have dozens of kids' files," stated Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and bestselling author Anna Quinlan. "But if a CASA volunteer is in the room, you will see they have just **one** file, and what they know is that **one** child. And that can make all the difference to a judge's decision regarding how the rest of that child's life is going to go."

According to a recent national survey of family court judges, CASA/GAL representatives were reported as "very useful" in yielding court decisions that are in the best interests of the child. Judges described the work of CASA volunteers as, "high-quality and clearly beneficial to the judicial decision-making process and beneficial to the children and

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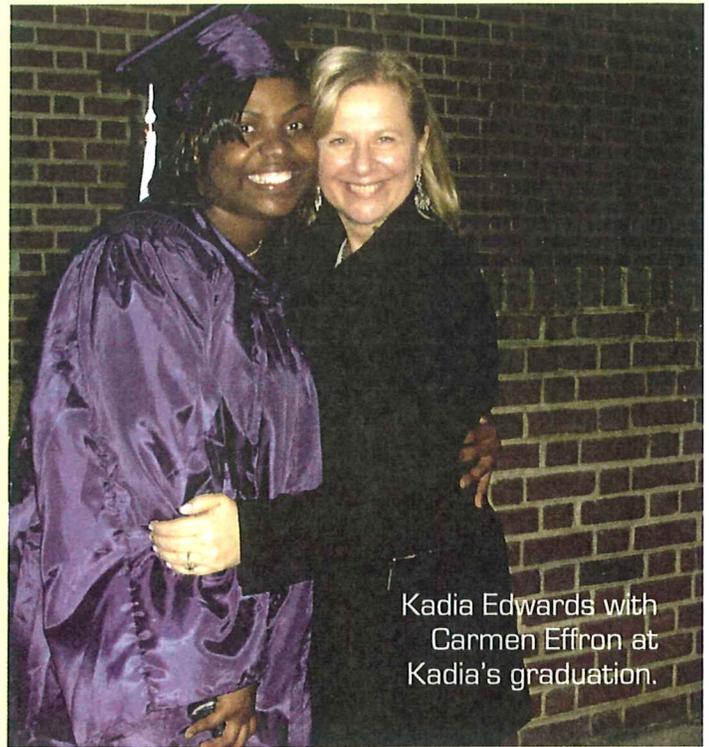
families served." However, the survey also revealed a strong need for more volunteers to represent the mounting needs of children, yet to be served.

Judge Glenda Hatchett, author of *Say What You Mean and Mean What You Say*, recalls the benefits of having CASA representatives on her cases. After just a few days as presiding judge of Atlanta's Fulton County juvenile court system, "I knew we needed CASA's volunteers," recalls Judge Hatchett, the first African-American to serve as chief presiding judge over a Georgia state court. "People think about juvenile court judges and think about kids who are committing offenses, but I also had jurisdiction on neglect and abuse. I've been in the trenches and I know how important it is to have CASA involved. People really need to understand the urgency of the situation. We cannot afford to lose these children."

It is a philosophy that Judge Hatchett refers to as, "Pre-Natal Care." It is not only the current children in foster care that benefit from the intervention and assistance of CASA's volunteers. "We are making a head start on the life of *their* children and their children's children. So our collective efforts will remain long after we are gone because they will positively affect generations to come."

Without the strength and sheer determination of CASA volunteers, many foster care children will face a new world of uncertainty once they "age-out" of the system. "If we don't put in place a measure of consistency, guidance and accountability *now*, we are destined to have another generation fall further behind," adds Judge Hatchett. "If these children don't have the structure, the means and the opportunity, they have a greater likelihood to become unemployed, homeless, drug addicted or involved in prostitution once they've 'aged-out' out of the system. We cannot afford to let that happen."

For African-American children especially, who comprise a disproportionate share of children in foster care, more advocacy is needed, specifically more culturally competent advocacy, to better serve the diverse needs of our children. "I'm finding that we need more African-American volunteers



Kadia Edwards with
Carmen Effron at
Kadia's graduation.

so that kids can better identify with their advocates," stated Marilyn Howard, CASA volunteer for nearly 10 years. Specifically, CASA is in need of African-American males to mentor, train, uplift and encourage those children.

Last year alone, 50,000 CASA members across 49 states, represented the interests of over 250,000 children in foster care, making a national impact and a lasting difference.

But the job is far from over.

"When I speak to a group of people, I ask them to close their eyes and imagine that they are standing in their favorite sports arena which may seat up to 20,000 people," says CASA's national spokesperson, Judge Hatchett. "I ask them to imagine that each chair is filled with a child. Then, I tell them to open their eyes and multiply that number by 25. That's how many children that will go to bed that evening needing a home. That is the number of our children in foster care who need, and deserve our help," she says. "Most people are stunned, I can hear the collective 'gasp' in the room, but that is the truth of our reality today. But the other truth is that one person really can make a difference. We stand in need of people who will join us to make that difference a part of a new reality, a better reality, and a positive reality – one child at a time."

For more information on how you can make a difference by becoming a part of CASA, log onto www.nationalcasa.org or call the African-American Outreach at (888) 805-8457. May is National Foster Care Month. For more information, please visit www.fostercaremonth.org. **UIM**

Nikitta A. Foston is a national journalist and freelance writer based in Chicago.