

Summary

I have recently begun training with the Central Texas Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) program, and, with each class, I am becoming more aware of the rights of children in foster care and of the positive impact that can be made when someone truly advocates for a child. The statements in this document may not sound as objective as the findings of a CASA advocate or judicial ruling, but I am hoping to speak for Bryan because, even more so than most other children in foster care, he cannot speak for himself. He and every child that has come through my classroom have the hearts of angels. They do not judge; they do not discriminate; and – amazingly considering what many have been through – they do not fear anyone. They are shining examples of seeing the best in everyone they meet, not only believing in us, but wanting us to believe in ourselves, trying to make us smile when we are down, giving us hugs even though they may have no idea why we are sad. The positive attitudes and generous spirits of children like Bryan make it even more important that impartial adults advocate for them in the child welfare system. Anyone who does a cursory inspection of Bryan at home is undoubtedly going to see a happy child. Even if he is experiencing intense pain, when Bryan sees concern on your face he is going to try to make you smile. An advocate must make sure that Bryan's smile does not betray him – that just because he loves an adult, it should not be assumed that his welfare and long term care are in the best of hands.

I wish for Bryan no less than I would wish for a child of my own. I strongly feel that Bryan is still adoptable. I hope that the frequent difficulties of finding adoptive parents for special needs children do not

lead to a quick decision in his case, under the incorrect assumption that his current situation is the best likely to be available.

I understand that standards for keeping a child with his biological parents are established so that the benefits of removing a child must strongly outweigh the negative impact of separating parent and child; however, I feel that the standard for adoption must be held much higher. It is not enough to simply safely shelter and feed a child and get him back and forth to the doctor. If such a home can be found, should not an adoptive home go above and beyond a minimum standard of care? The policy of separating children with special needs from their typically developing siblings is tough enough to accept. At the least, can we not try to find permanent placements for children that reflect our values of caring, inclusive families?

If I am able to provide any additional information, data, insight, or support on Bryan's behalf, please do not hesitate to contact me. I am in training for a new position in the Special Education department, and, so, I will most likely not be Bryan's teacher next school year. I know that this may be my last chance to try to do what I feel is right in support of Bryan, and I hope that my letter and any further assistance I can provide will have a positive impact on Bryan's future.

Most sincerely

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Rebecca Sheffield". The signature is written in black ink on a white background.

Rebecca Sheffield