

“YOU REALLY ARE PLAYING WITH PEOPLE’S LIVES”:  
UNDERSTANDING VOICE AND ADVOCACY IN THE COURT APPOINTED  
SPECIAL ADVOCATE PROGRAM

A Dissertation

by

SHELLY N. BLAIR

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of  
Texas A&M University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

August 2012

Major Subject: Communication

“You Really are Playing With People’s Lives:” Understanding Voice and Advocacy in  
the Court Appointed Special Advocate Program

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## ABSTRACT

“You Really Are Playing with People’s Lives”: Understanding Voice and Advocacy in  
the Court Appointed Special Advocate Program. (August 2012)

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In 1977, a Seattle judge, exasperated at having to make life-altering decisions for children with little information, founded the Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) program. In 2010, 75,000 people in 49 states volunteered their time to advocate for a child or sibling set in foster care. This project is aimed at understanding the issues of voice and advocacy imbedded within the organization Advocates For Kids and within the foster care system at large through critical ethnography. Further, this dissertation aspires to illuminate the complex ethics at play in the foster care system. This dissertation seeks to reveal the complicated ways in which the law is enacted by individuals such as foster parents, judges, and lawyers.

Specifically, the dissertation provides an in-depth examination of the role of the Court Appointed Special Advocate. CASAs are volunteers trained by the nonprofit organization, Advocates For Kids, who advocate on behalf of children in foster care. I collected data via interviews, observation, document examination, and reflexivity to

present a crystallized account of the issues of voice and advocacy in the work of Advocates For Kids. Based on the data, I expound three categories of voice at play in the work of VFC: Imagined Voice, Monitored Voice, and Stifled Voice. I also argue that volunteers intentionally perform privilege in order to ethically advocate for the children with whom they work. The dissertation concludes with a performative script based on the project designed to represent the complexity of the foster care system.

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## NOMENCLATURE

AFK	Advocates For Kids
CASA	Court Appointed Special Advocate
CPS	Child Protective Services

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Chad escorted me into his cheerfully decorated house. “We can sit in the kitchen, or on the couches, and I also set up the card table for us here in the living room. I thought you might like the space.” I usually prefer to sit on a couch for interviews so we both feel more like friends catching up, but I wanted Chad to know I appreciated the trouble he went to. “The table would be perfect, thank you.” I glanced out the window at the bright suburban street while he got us some water from the kitchen. The Texas sun burned hot on me minutes before as I drove around trying to find Chad’s home. I got so lost that I used up all my cushion time and arrived at Chad’s ten minutes late. As we made small talk, I realized how excited he was about our interview and I felt bad for making him wait.

Chad is around 70, tall with grey hair and glasses; he fits the image of a retired Chemistry Professor. He speaks slowly, carefully, almost as if he is measuring each word to control its impact. Chad reminds me of my father, the retired engineer who wishes he could still work; I immediately feel a warm connection to him. It takes little time to get him talking about a current case.

“Joaquin was 14 when I was assigned to his case. And right away I noticed that he had been in eight different Residential Treatment Centers in two years. Eight.”

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This dissertation follows the style of *Western Journal of Communication*.

Chad's eyes met mine, examining the shocked expression on my face. "So I started to investigate what was going on, and this is what I found out."

Chad told me that within one to two months of being placed in a Residential Treatment Center (RTC), Joaquin tells the staff he wants to commit suicide. At that point, the RTC is forced to send him immediately to a mental institution, where he spends 2-4 weeks. Then they ship him off to another RTC, and everything starts all over again.

Each time Joaquin goes to a new RTC, they add more psychiatric medications to his prescriptions. He receives a lot of attention, but is never in one place long enough for anyone to really examine him and decide what he should be taking.

Chad explained, "I noticed this pattern in his file, and I talked to the CPS case worker about it. She said she was aware of the problem, but didn't have any time to deal with it. They're so overwhelmed over there."

My heart broke for this child who hated his life so much. He was clearly crying out for help, and he was being passed around like a hot potato.

"So, what did you do?"

Chad called several of Joaquin's psychiatrists who never called back. He eventually talked to a psychiatrist from the RTC and convinced him to cut the medications in half. Chad was relieved, but didn't want to stop there.

Chad recalled, "I said 'This suicide issue, I'm worried something is really wrong.' The psychiatrist said 'I can't help you with that, you need to talk to his therapist about why he's saying he wants to kill himself so often.' Then I said 'Okay well, I'd

really like to meet you, can I meet you sometime when you're going over to the RTC?' And he said 'Well I'm going this Saturday but I won't have time. I'm seeing all the kids.'"

Chad leaned across the table and locked eyes with me. "There are 79 kids at the RTC. 79. And he was seeing them all in one day." Chad threw up his hands and held them above his head. They were hanging there as my mouth dropped open. "So, really, how much time is he spending with these kids?!" Chad's voice grew loud with indignation.

"Wow. Wow," was all I could manage to say as I shook my head.

"I've reported that, and maybe something will be done about it, but probably not. Shortly after that Joaquin was switched to another place, and I talked to the therapist right away about this issue. I said 'You know, either something is really wrong, or he's learned to manipulate the system.' The therapist smiled and said, 'He won't get away with that here. When a kid talks about suicide, we put the whole cabin on 24-hour watch. He doesn't get to change to a new one.' So about a month ago I talked to his therapist and asked him how Joaquin was doing. The therapist said 'He talked to me twice, he said that he was thinking about suicide. And both times I pointed out that we put the cabin on 24-hour watch if he was really thinking about that, and that he wouldn't be sent away. Both times he smiled and said 'It's not worth it then is it.'"

Chad leaned back and shook his head. "And this is what I suspected all along, it was just a threat. He just was manipulating the system by doing this. So I think this is what AFK does, tries to work with the therapist and the staff, and tries to find out what

their problems are and see if we can't reach some agreement. We find out what is bothering the kid and try to talk to him about it.”

After two months of interviewing and several months studying the foster care system, I can't believe I'm still surprised by these stories. But I am. Joaquin stays in my head all day. How could this happen?

\*\*\*\*\*

At Advocates For Kids (AFK), victories for a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) are often small, tedious, and hard fought, like those in Chad's story. Chad was able to get Joaquin's medications reduced, and stop him from moving all over the state, which meant he didn't need to change schools every two months. Chad was able to help Joaquin find some stability, and give him a chance to succeed in high school. Child Protective Services (CPS) is the social service agency that is supposed to fill the role of advocating for the child, but CPS caseworkers are often handling 15-20 cases at a time, and can't give each child the detailed attention he or she needs. In 1977, a Seattle judge, exasperated at having to make life-altering decisions for children with little information, founded the CASA program. In 2010, 75,000 people in 49 states volunteered their time to advocate for a child or sibling set in foster care. CASAs are assigned to the “worst” cases, meaning the most complicated or emotionally difficult cases. They can also be requested by the foster child.

This project is aimed at understanding the issues of voice and advocacy imbedded within the organization Advocates For Kids and within the foster care system at large. Further, this dissertation aspires to illuminate the complex ethics at play in the

foster care system. After a child is removed from the home by the State, the State's actions are guided by the laws that govern the CPS system. However, this dissertation seeks to reveal the complicated ways in which the law is enacted by individuals such as foster parents, judges, and lawyers. Specifically, the dissertation provides an in-depth examination of the role of the Court Appointed Special Advocate. CASAs are volunteers trained by the nonprofit organization, Advocates For Kids, who advocate on behalf of children in foster care.

The foster care system (often referred to as “the system”) is a complicated dance of multiple people who fill various roles. In order to understand the role of CASAs, this chapter now turns to a description of each of the key players in the system, their goals, and their responsibilities.

#### *Key Players in the Foster Care System*

The key players in the foster care system include CPS caseworkers and supervisors, who are responsible for responding to allegations of child abuse and neglect, removing the child from the home, and finding a home for the child to live in. Within 24 hours of a report, a CPS caseworker must attempt face-to-face contact with the child. Within three days, the caseworker must decide if the case is going to move forward. The caseworker looks for several types of abuse/neglect: physical abuse, physical neglect, sexual abuse, medical neglect, neglect of supervision, refusal to accept parental responsibility, and abandonment. CPS will then categorize the case into one of four options:

- 1) RTB, or Reason To Believe: in this category, CPS takes steps to remove the child.
- 2) RO, or Ruled Out: this is the option used if the report appears to be false.
- 3) UTD, or Unable To Determine: in this situation, the caseworker is not sure if there is abuse or neglect, and requests more time to investigate.
- 4) UTC, Unable to Complete: in this option, the caseworker has not been able to make contact with the child/sibling set, and needs more time to investigate.

Once the case is in RTB status, CPS removes the child from the home. At this point, CPS has 45 days to collect information and participate in the Family Group Conference before a mandatory hearing in court.

Further, while a child is in the system, the caseworker is required to see her or him at least once a month. CPS testifies in court, handles all the paperwork related to the judge-ordered services for a child or parent, places children in homes, and pays foster parents for care of the child. CPS typically has one year from the date the case is opened (which would be the date the child was removed) to decide what happens to the child/sibling set. The first goal in every case for CPS must be reunification of the child and parents. In Brazos County, Texas, 30% of children are reunited with parents, and 50-60% are adopted. This leaves a gap of 10-20% who end up in long-term foster care homes or treatment centers.

Family Court Judges preside over hearings to decide if a child should be returned to his/her home, what actions the parents need to take to reform themselves so a child can be returned, or if a child should be placed in foster care or an adoptive home. The



judge reads documents from CPS and CASAs, and hears from each party in court before making a decision. The judge's responsibility is to uphold the Texas state laws that indicate that a child must either be returned to the home of origin, adopted, or placed in the foster care system permanently before the deadline. Judges set measurable goals for parents, caseworkers, and lawyers. For example, a CPS caseworker may request a monthly drug screening for a parent. The judge may decide that because the parent works 8-5 every day, that request would be too burdensome, and rule that the parent complete a drug test every 60 days instead. A judge also rules on the placement of the child and the care of the child while under the supervision of the state. For example, a CASA may request that the child attend therapy twice a week instead of once a month. The judge listens to the CASA's reasons for requesting more therapy, and can rule in support of the request, deny the request, or amend it.

Each individual parent may have a lawyer, or they may both use the same lawyer depending on the case. It's also possible that only one parent is involved in the case (such as a single mother). The parent's lawyer is required to advocate for the parent's expressed wishes. For example, if a father wants to have weekly phone calls with his child while the child is in foster care, the lawyer will request that the judge make this ruling. Further, if a mother has a history of drug use, but expresses interest in keeping custody of the child, the lawyer must advocate for custody.

Lawyers for the child or sibling set are required to advocate for the child's expressed wishes. For example, if a boy wants to be reunited with his parents, even if

there is a pattern of abuse or neglect, the lawyer is required to advocate for reunification. There is no requirement that the lawyer spend any amount of time with the child.

Early in the process, a Family Group Conference is typically held. This conference is a collaborative mediation run by facilitators at the Dispute Resolution Center. Parents, CPS, attorneys, and CASAs (if they are assigned at this point) meet to decide on a Family Plan of Service. This document outlines the expectations of the family and the requirements parents need to meet to get their children back. Family Group Conferences can last for hours, and at the end everyone must sign on to the plan. If the family disagrees with this plan, they can contest it in court. The goal of these meetings is to collaboratively decide what needs to happen to make the home safe for the children. For example, the Family Service Plan may state that the parent needs to find employment, complete weekly therapy appointments, and attend parenting classes in order to get the children back.

Foster parents care for children on a temporary basis. Children may be placed in any certified foster care home in the state. Though the state tries to place children near their former home, there is no requirement that they be placed near the parents or in the same school district. As such, children often have to change schools as part of their removal from the home. Foster parents are paid a subsidy for each child in their care. In 2011, the subsidy for child is \$400 a month for a child, and \$540 a month for a child with special needs. Children are not always placed with their siblings.

CASAs are Court Appointed Special Advocates. They are volunteers whose goal is to advocate for the child's best interest. They commit to spending at least a year on a

case, and it often takes longer. They have access to all the files relating to the child and some relating to the child's family. They have access to the various players in the child's life and the court case. They are authorized to talk to teachers, therapists, case workers, lawyers, parents, family, foster parents, treatment centers, and daycare providers.<sup>1</sup> If there are multiple children in a family, a CASA will generally be an advocate for all of the sisters and brothers.

CASAs are authorized to perform home visits to assess the condition of the home in which the children may be placed. They also meet with the child at least once a month and spend time getting to know him or her. They attempt to build trust with the child, and submit court reports and testify to the child's best interest. This does not necessarily mean they advocate for the child's expressed wishes (as the child's lawyer does). For example, a child may wish to live with her mother, but if the CASA does not feel that the mother is capable of caring for the child properly, the CASA will not advocate for that outcome. CASAs also perform visitations of prospective adoptive homes to determine if the child is bonded to the family and if the home seems safe for the child. In this way, CASAs work to provide a better future for the child in foster care.

CASAs also advocate for the child's interest in the present. This can include building trust by spending time with the child, providing encouragement or advice on behavior issues, and advocating for a child in foster care. For example, one CASA was

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<sup>1</sup> Each program is set up differently and governed by state and county laws. In Brazos county, CASAs have access to everyone they would like to talk to about the child, and are legally empowered to request documents. In some states, a CASA's power is more limited, inhibiting their ability to intervene on behalf of the child. The more access the CASA has to information, the more detailed picture they can paint of the child's life for the judge. This enables the judge to make better decisions for the child, which is the goal of CASAs.

saddened to learn that a basketball was stolen from a child while at a foster home. She was able to track the basketball down and return it to the child.

A CASA's role is designed to be temporary. So while CASAs are encouraged to build trust with children to understand their best interests, they are discouraged from pretending to be a permanent fixture in the child's life. For example, CASAs are discouraged from sharing too much of their personal lives with the child. Their role is professional, and requires some detachment so as not to deceive the child.

Once a child has been removed from the home, there are four possible outcomes. The first goal is always reunification. In this option, the parent reforms the problematic behaviors that caused the child to be removed. For example, a parent may attend parenting classes, discontinue drug use, enter therapy, or move to a new home to provide a safe place for the child to live. The second option is Permanent Managed Care, or PMC. The third option is relative adoption, and the fourth is non-relative adoption.

Permanent adoption is only possible if the rights of the parent(s) have been terminated. This could happen either through the courts, or if the parents voluntarily agrees that the child should have another home. If a child is adopted without termination of parental rights, the parents could take the state and the new adoptive family to court to get the child back at any time. For this reason, if reunification is not possible, CPS will advocate for termination of parental rights.

However, termination of parental rights and permanent adoption means that the state no longer provides a subsidy for care of the child. For example, if a parent decides to give up a child to a relative (relative adoption), and the care is made permanent, the

state will not give the relative a subsidy to help care for the child. Therefore, adoptive parents may be stuck in a difficult situation in which they want to care for a child, but cannot afford to unless the state provides the small stipend. If they accept the temporary placement, the child's parents could sue at any time for custody. Therefore, it is not always in the child's best interest to pursue termination of parental rights, because the child may end up in foster care until she "ages out" at eighteen, even though she is bonded to a relative who wants to adopt.

FightCPS is a parents' rights advocacy website devoted to helping parents get their children returned after removal from the home. According to the website: "FightCPS is intended to help people learn enough about the law to be able to successfully defend themselves and their families against false accusations using legal documents and strategies that put parents in a stronger position when they go back to court." The site explains its purpose: "Child Protective Services laws and agencies are abusive to families and children. This site provides support and information to parents falsely accused of child abuse by Child Protective Services" (FightCPS.com). There are anti-CASA comments on the site as well. Many sites and groups exist with similar goals, but this is one of the most extensive, and will be used to represent this anti-CPS movement.

While issues of voice and advocacy are always consequential, the impact is especially pronounced in the foster care system. As illustrated by the previous description, the foster care system is characterized by disparate voices, ethical gray areas, and conflicting goals. The decisions carried out by each player have lasting

consequences for the families involved. The foster care system's success relies on the process of advocacy, and the decisions the judges make are based on the voices of each party. Voice and advocacy have material, as well as emotional, consequences on the families involved in the system. Examining the role of voice in the foster care system will help us understand how laws are enacted through people, and the links among power, voice, and materiality. Investigating the practice of advocacy in this context draws out the ethical concerns of advocacy and highlights the system's successes and failures. The chapter now turns to a discussion of the concept of voice.

### *Voice*

Voice is a metaphor for thinking about power in context. In order to define voice, the chapter draws upon feminist history and theory, communication research, and the works of Bakhtin. Each section concludes by specifying the contributions the area makes to our understanding of voice. I have called these "Principles of Voice." These three areas of research serve as a literature review for my investigation of voice at Advocates For Kids.

### **Voice and Feminism**

Voice became a concern early in the second-wave feminist movement when women formed consciousness-raising groups. This consciousness-raising movement involved groups of women meeting together and sharing concerns, frustrations, and experiences (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000). These meetings became a safe space for women to communicate. Further, by connecting their experiences, women were led to understand their struggles as collective, rather than individual, phenomena. As these

(mostly white, upper class) women discovered that their struggles were shared by other women, they began to organize “speak-outs.” The first speak-out about abortion in 1969 was organized by the RedStockings (Dubriwny, 2005). During speak-out events, women spoke to crowds about their experiences, their perspectives, and their values because they believed that women’s voices were missing from the public discourse, and that this led to women’s disenfranchisement. In the abortion speak-out, for example, women interrupted a legislative hearing about abortion and demanded to be heard. They argued that the panel which consisted of all men (save one nun) was not taking into account their perspectives (Dubriwny, 2005). The abortion speak-out inspired speak-outs across the nation on a variety of issues. As Dubriwny (2005) states,

the abortion speak-out was the first public speak-out in the feminist movement and became a model for later movement discourse (e.g. speak-outs on a variety of subjects including rape, childhood sexual abuse, violence against lesbian and gay communities, and AIDS, Take Back The Night marches, the million mom march, the million man march, and self-help support groups for a wide variety of issues) (p. 396).

By connecting their individual experiences, second-wave feminists recognized that women were being left out of decision-making processes in a variety of contexts. In order to counter the dominant narratives that resulted in their exclusion, feminists literally raised their voices. Speaking about a woman’s life was a political act, and the first step toward gaining a metaphorical voice in institutions such as the government.

The early actions of the second-wave feminist movement can be seen as setting the stage for the development of feminist standpoint theory.

Hartsock (1983) developed standpoint theory by examining Marx's assumptions about class and reflecting on the role of gender in the process of oppression (something Marx does not fully address). In essence, she theorized that genders themselves create classes of people, or standpoints, which lead to specific world views based on a person's position in life. From her initial work on the feminist standpoint theory, multiple researchers incorporated the epistemological assumptions into their work. The result is that feminist standpoint theory is not one theory per se, but rather a theoretical response to studies in feminist ethics. Feminist ethics is the study of the nature of power and relationships within a community (Dow & Condit, 2005).

According to O'Brien Hallstein (1999), feminist standpoint theories offer a unique way of viewing how communities function under patriarchal structures. O'Brien Hallstein explains that feminist standpoint theorists argue that women necessarily occupy a subordinate position in patriarchal culture that is structured by power relations, and that this position is "qualitatively different" than men's (p. 35). Because of this, women as a community share the experience of being a uniquely disadvantaged group. Feminist standpoint theories illuminate the ways in which women have been "systematically exploited, oppressed, excluded, devalued, and dominated" (O'Brien Hallstein, p. 35). Men, as the elevated or empowered class, seek to retain their position of dominance.



Standpoint feminism asserts that some voices are attended to while other voices are suppressed. Bullis and Stout explain, “standpoint feminism assumes that, through social processes and institutional arrangements, some voices are positioned as dominant or master voices, while others are positioned as marginalized, excluded, or servant voices” (2000, p. 55). This theory began with the goal of illuminating “the woman’s voice” (as a marginalized voice) in various contexts in order to expose and explore “the woman’s” standpoint. Yet standpoint feminism has evolved in recent years, and rather than present a unified “voice of the woman,” it seeks to uplift the multiple, unique, specific struggles, triumphs, and voices of women (Bullis & Stout, 2000). For example, standpoint feminism was applied to organizations by Allen (1996) to understand the African-American female experience as a faculty member. Allen’s work extends the theory of standpoint feminism to include race and class as well as gender. The underlying assumption of standpoint feminism and the speak-outs of the second-wave feminist movement is that voice is political.

Another feminist theory that examines the oppression of voices is muted group theory. Muted group theory was introduced by Shirley Ardener and Edwin Ardener as a critique of anthropological methods (1975). They argued that when studying a culture, researchers tend to speak to the men and generalize their perspectives to the whole culture. The theory highlights the ways that dominant groups suppress the voice, perspective, and language of the subordinated group through communication (Kramerae, 2009). Muted group theory explains how power is coded into language, and how communication sustains oppression. It echoes feminist standpoint theory by arguing that

men and women perceive the world differently, yet muted group theory draws attention to how that premise affects communication. The dominant modes of expression are canonized into institutions, e.g. the law, in a way that further disenfranchises women by “muting” their voices (Ardener & Ardener, 1975; Kramarae, 1981). Women are therefore “constrained” (Kramarae, 2005, p. 55). Houston and Kramarae (1991) describe some of the ways in which women’s voices have been muted. They argue that ridicule, censorship, homophobia, the media, reproductive issues, educational practices, and even terrorism have been used to silence women. Recently, muted group theory has been utilized to understand how hierarchies beyond gender (such as race, class) impact communication (Kramarae, 2005).

This leads us to the first principle of voice: voice is political. Once we understand that some voices are included and others are excluded from public discourse through institutions (e.g. the government, the media, and the church), it becomes clear that voice is connected to power, democracy, and control. Voice can refer literally to speaking, and it can also be used as a metaphor for positionality, perspective, and power. After discussing the history of voice, the chapter now turns to the study of voice in communication research.

### **Voice in Communication Research**

The concept of voice asks scholars to interrogate who is allowed to speak, for whom, and who is silenced. Examining voice requires scholars to confront who is given a seat at the table, and who is left out. Asking questions about voice emanates from

asking questions about power—who is allowed to speak and who is silenced is a key way that power is organized.

Voice has been researched extensively by scholars in organizational communication. Robin Patric Clair's work on silence and silencing in organizations defines silence as an "expressive activity" that can be transformed into an act of resistance (1998, p. xiv). Clair has conducted multiple studies on silencing and sexual harassment. She posits that communication can be "silencing" and institutions can silence voices.

Putnam, et al. (1996) found voice to be a pervasive metaphor used in the study of organizational communication and explicated its utility:

This metaphor focuses our attention on the ability of members to make their experiences heard and understood; on the existence of an appropriate language of expression; on the willingness of others to listen; and on the values, structures, and practices that suppress voice (p. 389).

Because of its links to power, the metaphor of voice is of particular interest to critical researchers, especially feminist organizational scholars (Putnam et al, 1996). Mumby and Stohl (1996) have also noted the importance of the study of voice to organizational communication scholars. They position voice as one of the "key problematics" that unifies the work of several researchers within the field along with the problematic of rationality, the problematic of organization, and the problematic of the organization-society relationship. These problematics serve to distinguish organizational communication from other disciplines that study organizational life. Mumby and Stohl

(1996) highlight the problematic of voice because organizational communication research is routinely concerned with two questions:

- 1) “How can we as organizational communication scholars provide insight into the practices of traditionally marginalized groups or forms of organizing?”
- 2) How can we show from a communication perspective that what appears natural and normal about organizing practices is actually socially constructed and obscures other organizational possibilities?” (p. 58).

Mumby and Stohl (1996) assert that organizational communication scholarship answers these questions by complicating voice in organizations through the consideration of the voice of authority (or managerial voice), voice of the employees, and voice of the scholar studying an organization. The organizational “chorus of voices,” to borrow Putnam et al.’s (1996) phrase, is even larger for nonprofit organizations, as the voices of volunteers, board members, community members, funders, and activists must also be considered. Communication scholars are fascinated with voice because voice is fundamentally communicative, and because it has consequences for people’s lives.

In the study of organizations, communication scholars are interested in the relationship between voice and power. As Mumby and Stohl (1996) point out, the question of who can speak about and on behalf of an organization is an ethical issue. If we accept that voices are always being uplifted or suppressed, we must begin to problematize the process by which this occurs and the consequences of it. For example, in organizations it used to be standard practice to fire a woman who became pregnant. The dominant managerial voice asserted that a pregnant woman would be unable to

perform her job and should be at home raising children. Yet after many years, the dominant voice about pregnancy in the workplace has shifted to include the voices of women who want to work while pregnant. Firing a woman for becoming pregnant is now illegal. Further, maternity leave and paternity leave are available in many organizations. In this way, women's voice in organizations has had significant material consequences for the workplace. This leads to the second and third principles of voice: voice is powerful and voice is consequential. Whose voice is supported and whose is silenced is a mechanism by which power is organized in institutions.

Beyond the day-to-day consequences, voice has implications for society as a whole. Mumby and Stohl explore the link between voice and democracy: "Ultimately, the issue of voice is integrally bound up with the relationship between communication, ethics, and democracy" (1996, p. 58). Voice is often theorized with the underlying assumption that voice is always good, and organizational participants desire or should (as a moral issue) have "more" voice. However, as Dempsey (2007) notes: "Mandating voice introduces a paradox of participation that may be disabling (Stohl & Cheney, 2001) or may privilege the most articulate (Clair, 1997)" (p. 316). Voice is undoubtedly political, but understanding the practice and implications of voice depends on close analysis of a context.

An example of context-laden analysis can be seen in Dempsey's (2007) study of bounded voice in an international nonprofit organization. According to Dempsey, "Bounded voice describes a dynamic organizational process in which opportunities for voice are strategically and provisionally limited to particular forums" (p. 312). While

traditional assumptions about power are critical of limiting voice, Dempsey problematizes the relationship between voice and power. She argues that bounded voice “is useful for understanding how communication functions to resolve and accentuate tensions endemic to participatory practice. The concept of bounded voice reveals how the suppression of voice in certain cases may actually further empowerment efforts” (p. 312). She provides several examples of this:

Restricting opportunities for voice can protect vulnerable stakeholders from outside scrutiny, or maintain individual member autonomy. Elite stakeholders might practice self-censorship to compensate for historical inequalities in opportunities for voice. Reducing voice may also function as a tactic for dealing with limited time, energy, or member commitment (p. 316).

By arguing that restricting voice can be empowering, Dempsey draws researchers’ attention to the importance of context in assessing the role of voice within an organization. Further, Dempsey’s study demonstrates that scholars need to move beyond binary assumptions about voice and silence to create a nuanced, situated, complicated awareness of voice. This leads to the fourth principle of voice: voice is not a binary. As illustrated in the previous example, “more” voice is not always “better.”

### **Voice and Bakhtin**

Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975) was a Russian philosopher whose work has had a significant impact in multiple fields because of his focus on language as central to our social world (Morris, 1994). Bakhtin was a religious man fascinated with science, and both of these passions can be seen in his concern for materiality and spirituality in his

writings (Holquist, 2002). Because of the social and political conditions in Russia during Bakhtin's lifetime, there is some mystery surrounding which works are authored by him and which were authored by his peers known as the Bakhtin Circle (Holquist, 2002; Morris, 1994). Though his work is considered philosophy, Bakhtin's influence can be seen in fields as diverse as post-colonial studies, cultural studies, feminist studies, anthropology, Marxism, and communication (Morris, 1994).

In order to carefully examine the consequences of language, Bakhtin developed a vocabulary of language that emphasizes the connectedness and constitutiveness of messages (Bakhtin, 1981). Bakhtin theorizes the relationship between language and interaction as mutually constitutive. Messages, or utterances for Bakhtin, are always directed at a partner and bound by context (Bakhtin, 1981, 1986). The consequence of this is that a communicative act must be understood through close examination of the context in which it was produced (Bakhtin, 1986).

Bakhtin has been previously used in communication scholarship to emphasize the role of context in interaction. For example, Barge and Little (2002) re-envision the role of dialogue within organizations by using Bakhtin's theories of context and voice. They argue that "the importance of the surrounding context for an episode of interaction cannot be understated" (p. 380). The value of context in interactions can be explored by examining Bakhtin's assumptions about language and the Other. Barge and Little continue:

Bakhtin links language use to one's ontological status, stating simply, "To be means to communicate" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 287). So long as we are engaged in

communication with others, we are engaged in a dialogical process that continually shapes and reshapes the self and Other (p. 383).

Bakhtin stresses the importance of language and ontology in interaction. By asserting an ever-present Other, he compels communication scholars to view words as always situated and aimed at an audience. Because of the importance of examining voice in organizations contextually (as illustrated by Dempsey, 2007), Bakhtin's theories enable me to perform a sophisticated analysis of voice in AFK.

Further, Barge and Little (2002) illustrate the application of Bakhtin's theory of voice specifically to organizations:

Drawing on Bakhtin, we use the notion of voice to characterize the process of conversational positioning within organizational life. Given that organizational life is composed of multiple, often conflicting voices, people are constantly making choices about whether to privilege one voice over another at a particular moment, whether to merge various voices together or to keep them separated, and whether to position voices in ways that promote agreement or maintain an opposition (p. 387).

Voice must be understood within the context of its production and re-production. Bakhtin's ideas about voice, dialogue, and communication are a useful heuristic for examining language and relationships in organizations. This points to the fifth principle of voice: voice is context-bound.

Bakhtin asserts that reported speech is especially bound by two contexts—the one in which it was originally produced, and the one in which it is being repeated.



Bakhtin explains: “The speech of another, once enclosed in a context is—no matter how accurately transmitted—always subject to certain semantic changes. The context embracing another’s word is responsible for its dialogizing background, whose influence can be very great” (1981, p. 78). Bakhtin complicates the process of speaking for another by arguing that reproducing an utterance exactly is not possible because the context has changed.

Further, he continues, “Given the appropriate methods for framing, one may bring about fundamental changes even in another’s utterance accurately quoted” (Bakhtin, 1981 p. 78). He asserts that the speaker may frame a reported utterance in a new manner, thus changing the original meaning in significant ways. This is evident by simply watching politicians quote one another on the evening news. However, the process of reproducing utterances is integral to the work of CASAs as they endeavor to “be a voice” for the child. Indeed, reproducing speech is endemic to the legal, and therefore foster care, system.

These ideas result in the sixth principle of voice: voice is an ethical issue. As Bakhtin cautions, “Any sly and ill-disposed polemicist knows very well which dialogizing backdrop he should bring to bear on the accurately quoted words of his opponent, in order to distort their sense” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 78). Voice can be intentionally altered to change its meaning and consequence. Therefore, the representation of voice must be judged in terms of an ethics of fairness and justice. Further, as explored in the organizational communication research, voice is an ethical issue, as certain voices are suppressed by actors and institutions.

The six principles of voice delineated by this chapter are:

- 1) Voice is political.
- 2) Voice is powerful.
- 3) Voice is consequential.
- 4) Voice is not a binary.
- 5) Voice is context-bound.
- 6) Voice is an ethical issue.

These principles are not disparate; they overlap, connect, and build on one another. Deriving these principles from the significant amount of scholarship on voice informs my investigation of voice at AFK. Still, a unifying theory about voice is lacking, and through the close examination of AFK wherein the principles of voice have heightened outcomes, this dissertation attempts to illuminate the concept of voice. In order to deepen and complicate our understanding of voice in organizational communication, the following research question is posed:

RQ1: How is voice constructed, constrained, and challenged within AFK?

The goal of AFK is to provide a voice for children through advocacy. After considering the issue of voice, the chapter now turns to a discussion of advocacy. My exploration of the practice of advocacy is informed by research on advocacy organizations in communication, feminist critique of the ethics of advocacy, and performative theory.

### *Advocacy*

An advocate is defined as “One that pleads the cause of another; one that supports or promotes the interests of another” (Advocate, 2012). The root of advocate is based in the Latin word for voice, *vocare* (Advocate, 2012). Advocacy can occur at the interpersonal level, such as standing up for someone, but also occurs at the institutional level through organizations, especially nonprofits. Kimberlin explains that “Many nonprofit organizations in the U.S. engage in advocacy, whether as a core organizational mission or as a secondary activity supporting a mission of direct service” (2010, p. 164). Further, advocacy can be distinguished as individual or collective. Individual advocacy occurs when an organization advocates for a particular client, whereas collective advocacy occurs when an organization advocates for a cause or group of people generally (Kimberlin). Nonprofit organizations, especially those that engage in advocacy, play a vital role in sustaining democracy by advocating for those who are acutely subject to being controlled by the government (Boris & Krehely, 2002; Kimberlin). For example, advocacy groups may speak on behalf of immigrants, human trafficking victims, or prison inmates, as these are all groups that the government has greater control over than ordinary citizens. Although advocacy is intrinsic to U.S. society, Kimberlin asserts that “the scope of advocacy by nonprofit organizations is still not well-understood, due to limitations in the data available and methods used” (p. 179), and that this lack of research attention is particularly pronounced in direct service organizations. Direct service organizations, often known as human service agencies, are those that directly interact with clients in order to help them. AFK is an example of a

direct service organization that focuses on advocacy as a goal. As previously discussed, AFK seeks to uplift the voices of children in the foster care system. AFK illustrates the uniquely intertwined relationship of voice and advocacy. One way to usefully complicate discussions of advocacy is to recognize the ethical dilemmas that are produced from speaking for another.

Some scholars have problematized the process and effects of advocacy. Privileged people speaking on behalf of disadvantaged groups can result in negative consequences such as victim-blaming, stereotyping, or furthering the belief that the disadvantaged people are helpless (Alcoff, 1991). Speaking for another can in some ways increase their oppression. This tension is ever-present in the enactment of advocacy. Alcoff asserts that it exists in both speaking for and speaking about the Other: “Thus I would maintain that if the problem of speaking for others is problematic, so too must be the practice of speaking about others, since it is difficult to distinguish speaking about from speaking for in all cases” (p. 9). In AFK, there may be a conflation of “speaking for” and “speaking about” the child, and there are likely to be ethical complications present in both instances. Yet the solution is not merely that a person should only speak for herself. As Alcoff (1991, p.8) explains:

adopting the position that one should only speak for oneself raises similarly problematic questions. For example, we might ask, if I don’t speak for those less privileged than myself, am I abandoning my political responsibility to speak out against oppression, a responsibility incurred by the very fact of my privilege?

Thus, the enactment of advocacy is fraught with complex ethical considerations, but the choice to not speak for others is often not seen as a reasonable or just alternative.

Because there are situations in which speaking for another may be seen as the best option, Alcoff (1991) develops four interrogatory practices designed to evaluate the act of speaking for another through enhanced self-reflection and self-awareness. The first practice is that “the impetus to speak must be carefully analyzed and, in many cases...fought against” (p. 24). Second, Alcoff suggests “we must also interrogate the bearing of our location and context on what it is we are saying, and this should be an explicit part of every serious discursive practice we engage in” (p. 25). Third, she contends that those who speak for another should be held accountable for what they say (Alcoff). Finally, Alcoff argues that the material and discursive effects of speaking for another should always be analyzed. While Alcoff is speaking largely to academics in her problematization of advocacy, her argument applies to various contexts. Advocacy in AFK can be analyzed using a critical orientation toward the functions and effects of volunteers speaking on behalf of others. Advocacy should not be evaluated in false binaries such as “good” or “bad,” but considered instead through a clear questioning of the context in a manner consistent with Bakhtin’s consideration of voice. Within AFK, advocacy is enacted by volunteers and staff in interactions spanning multiple times and spaces aimed at diverse audiences. For example, CASAs speak with teachers, parents, therapists, and doctors in order to advocate for the child. This involves determining the child’s needs and then fighting for them, as demonstrated in the example of Chad and Joaquin at the beginning of the chapter. In order to examine advocacy as an embodied,

situated practice, this chapter now introduces a performative lens that will be useful in examining the practice of advocacy.

### **Performance and Advocacy**

Performance theory attunes us to the body and focuses on context by seeing everyday life as a series of roles played by people for a specific audience. CASAs advocate across multiple contexts. CASAs advocate for their child/sibling set while in interaction with the child/children, when communicating with caseworkers and teachers, in the office while reporting to the volunteer coordinator, in trainings with other volunteers, and while representing the organization at events. Though the audiences shift and the method of advocacy changes depending on the context, the activities together constitute advocacy. Viewing all of these different yet related and intertwined enactments of advocacy as performance reveals that advocacy is a practice produced in a context altered for an audience. As Hamera (2006) explains: “Performance is critical to contemporary views of culture as enacted, rhetorical, contested, and embodied. It functions as an organizing trope for examining a wide range of social practices” (p. 2). Drawing upon the performative lens links seemingly disparate actions to create a more complete and complex picture of the practice of advocacy.

Performance concentrates on enactment in that it “makes things and does things, in addition to describing how they are made or done” (Hamera, 2006, p. 6). The attention to doing and making shifts the epistemological foundation of the academy away from empirical knowing-from-without. Conquergood (2002) declares that performance is

another way of knowing that is grounded in active, intimate, hands-on participation and personal connection: “knowing how” and “knowing who.” This is a view from the ground level, in the thick of things. This is knowledge that is anchored in practice and circulated within a performance community, but is ephemeral (p. 146).

This view from the “thick of things” opens up new ways for researchers to understand their data. Further, this view enables scholars in the area of performance theory to attend to the ethical concerns about advocacy raised by Alcoff (1991).

Performance perspectives also seek to elucidate subversive power relations: “The complex workings of power, and social positions that accrue to bodies based on multiple dimensions of difference, are central to critical performance-based scholarship” (Hamera, 2006, p. 7). Performance perspectives critique power and the role of the body in interaction, and use those critiques for the purposes of social change. As Conquergood (2002) shows, activism is a key component of performance scholarship: “This epistemological connection between creativity, critique, and civic engagement is mutually replenishing and pedagogically powerful” (p. 153).

Specifically, social performance theory conceptualizes social life as a set of roles performed in everyday activities. Key theorists of this perspective include Victor Turner and Erving Goffman. According to Turner, “social performances are the ordinary, day-by-day interactions of individuals and the consequences of these interactions as we move through social life” (Turner, 1982, 32). Similarly, Goffman highlights the importance of everyday interaction as a site of study. Madison describes that “for Goffman,

performance can be defined as ‘all activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his [sic] continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers’ (Madison, 2005, p. 156). Further, Goffman adds to social performance theory through his articulation of ‘roles.’ Madison clarifies:

Goffman emphasizes the various tasks and functions individuals assume as ‘roles’ that carry with them scripted characteristics or ‘fronts’ (e.g. settings, costumes, gestures, voice, appearances, and demeanor). These roles in everyday life are based upon the relationships between the performers and an audience (p. 155).

In both quotations, we can see that Goffman is invested in the meaning created in front of a particular audience. In social performance theory, day-to-day interaction is marked by a role and an audience. This perspective demands that researchers consider messages as produced in context. Further, if performance is a set of roles, rather than an expression of a “true” identity, advocates can feel comfortable (if not obligated) to take the Other’s point of view and let go of their own positionality. This view demands that CASAs recognize the impact their privilege has on the advocacy they perform. For example, each act of advocacy should be slightly altered to fit the context. The performative lens begins by questioning the audience and context of a communicative act. If the role is something we play during discrete periods of time, the advocate is free from forcing their beliefs, privilege, and experiences on another. Performance theory allows advocacy to be seen as an activity.

### **Performance in Advocates For Kids**



Applying a performance perspective to AFK reveals that advocacy is a dynamic role that changes its functions and effects based on context. Advocates must engage in multiple activities in order to perform the role of speaking for the child, and each of these activities is constrained by the context within which it occurs. For example, staff and volunteers represent the organization differently to the parents of a child in care than they do to the judge in court. Thus, the practice of advocacy must be examined both as a discrete action and as part of a larger performance. Further, through its emphasis on audience, the performative lens requires a consideration of short- and long-term consequences of acts. Because performance theory allows us to see the acts of advocacy as part of the same performance, advocates are always accountable for what they say and do. That is, their actions are not evaluated singularly; rather, the advocate is evaluated as an actor across multiple scenes. This addresses Alcott's concern that "speaking should always carry with it an accountability" (1991, p. 25).

Social performance theory allows the researcher to see the multiple activities of advocacy as related, even intertwined, yet always produced for an audience. Recognizing the ethical complexities of advocacy and the performance of the role of advocate by volunteers and staff, the following research question is posed:

RQ2: How do AFK staff and volunteers practice advocacy?

In this chapter, I introduced the key players of the foster care system and their responsibilities. I then discussed of the concept voice as influenced by feminist history and theory, communication research, and Bakhtin and introduced the six principles of voice: voice is political, voice is powerful, voice is consequential, voice is not a binary,

voice is context-bound, and voice is an ethical issue. Following the exploration of the concept of voice, I examined the ethical issues surrounding the topic of advocacy and introduced performance theory as a lens for understanding the practice of advocacy. In the next chapter, I will discuss the research site and methodology of the dissertation.

## CHAPTER II

### METHODOLOGY

“The voice reaching us from a great distance must find a place in the text.”

----de Certeau, 1984, p. 159

The above quotation illustrates the goal of data collection for this project: to amplify the voices of the people who work with and for abused and neglected children, and the voices of the children themselves. To attune myself to the subtleties and multiple perspectives involved in the process of speaking for another person, this study was designed to produce a crystallized text. This chapter first describes the site of the project, then introduces the study design method of crystallization, explores the benefits of the design, and details the three patches of the project.

#### *Advocates For Kids*

Advocates for Kids (AFK) is a non-profit organization founded in 2000 that serves three counties in Texas. AFK is affiliated with both the state and national chapters of the organization known as CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocates). The organization adopted AFK as its name because another organization in town was already using the name CASA. AFK’s goal is for every child in foster care to find a safe, permanent home.

AFK is comprised of a staff of nine women, seven of whom are full-time employees and two part-time. The office also employs an intern or student worker. AFK has a board of thirteen community members, and approximately one hundred volunteers.

Volunteer activities involve training for and serving as a Court Appointed Special Advocate for a child or sibling set, serving on the board of directors, or becoming a “Friend of AFK,” which involves serving on various committees such as fundraising and event planning, helping out with events, and general office duties.

In 2010, there were 79 active CASAs at AFK, and the remaining 15-20 volunteers performed tasks around the office and sat on fundraising committees. AFK served 400 children in 2010, and more than 75% of those children were placed in a safe, permanent home. AFK’s goal is to serve 100% of the children in foster care in its service area.

Advocates For Kids purchased its office building in the historic downtown area of Bryan in 2006. In January of 2011, the community participated in a renovation project to remodel the building to fit AFK’s needs. The office now consists of two individual offices, a large meeting area, a conference room, a wall of cubicles for the staff, and a kitchen area. After describing the field site, this chapter turns to a description of the patches that comprise the project.

### *Crystallization*

Crystallization is a concept developed by Laura Ellingson from Laurel Richardson’s classic essay “Writing as a Method of Inquiry” (2000). Ellingson developed crystallization as a postmodern, qualitative iteration of triangulation for the formation of qualitative projects. Crystallization mingles various types of data collection, analysis, and presentation to create a postmodern project that problematizes knowledge even as it generates it. By offering multiple, often contradictory,

perspectives, the reader is forced to be an active participant in knowledge creation. In this way, crystallization exposes the partiality of the researcher's voice and highlights the socially constructed nature of reality (Ellingson, 2009).

The goal of crystallization reflects the underlying assumptions of post modernity and social constructionism. It also operates from the assumption that there is no such thing as a neutral choice about data representation. Ellingson notes that feminist scholars have long pushed the academy's disciplinary boundaries and acknowledges that crystallization has its roots in the work of "feminist theorists and methodologists" (2009, p. 3). Crystallization is the weaving of multiple ways of knowing and multiple genres of data presentation to create a qualitative project that embraces the dance of science and art as an important way to understand the worlds we study.

#### *Benefits of Crystallization*

There are multiple benefits to using crystallization as a framework for study design, execution, and research presentation for this project. Namely, crystallization destabilizes the hierarchy in research, aids activism, forces me as a researcher out of my comfort zone, and allows for postmodern approaches to truth.

Crystallization destabilizes the hierarchy of the research-participant relationship by honoring participants' voices. Ellingson (2009) asserts that researchers should "incorporate participants' perspectives into analysis, representing them in ways that honor their perspectives" (p. 13). Additionally, through the consideration of multiple publics and the use of multiple genres for representation, a crystallized approach

performatively highlights voice issues in the research process. It gives specific attention to the voice of the participants as well as to the voice of the researcher.

Another significant advantage to a crystallized approach is that it aids activist research as it incorporates a consideration for many publics in the study design (Ellingson, 2009). Activism is not an afterthought tacked on through ‘implications for practice’ in the discussion section; it is a central focus of the research from its inception. By considering many audiences, crystallized research projects counteract the exclusivity of academic jargon. They counter the privilege of education, and the system that keeps knowledge confined to a select inner circle. As Ellingson (2009) points out, crystallization “offers an ideal mechanism for accomplishing the goal of public engagement because of its emphasis on producing a range of representations suitable for a variety of stakeholder audiences, both within and outside the academy” (p. 179). Specifically for this project, crystallization demands that I talk about voice, advocacy, and communication in a way that participants will understand.

Further, crystallization forces the researcher to get out of her comfort zone through the use of multiple methods of data collection and presentation (Ellingson, 2009). Rather than imposing the limits of a particular method, crystallization invites researchers to join seemingly disparate approaches to produce creative, rich understandings of the social world. Crystallization also calls upon researchers to pursue artistic means of presenting data. Creativity and art are not often included in typical research projects. Indeed, for many scholars, these activities will be out of their comfort zone.

Finally, crystallization allows me to embrace a postmodern approach to truth (Ellingson, 2009). This research does not aim to discover the “Truth” of a situation; rather, crystallization demands the ability to play with multiple, conflicting perspectives while looking for patterns among data. It calls on the researcher to “encounter and make sense of your data through more than one way of knowing” (Ellingson, 2009, p. 11). This prohibits the researcher from operating from a single bias; instead, the researcher seeks to offer an interpretation alongside other, contradictory interpretations. Rather than undermining the researcher, this ability to embrace ambiguity and multiple, conflicting perspectives allows for greater understanding of our social worlds.

#### *Application of Crystallization Framework*

After considering the benefits of a crystallized approach to this project, I will now illustrate the implementation of the approach. It is important to distinguish between integrated and dendritic crystallization. Ellingson explains, “Integrated crystallization involves producing a written and/or visual text consisting of multiple genres that reflect (and straddle) multiple points on the qualitative continuum” (2009, p. 97). In contrast, dendritic crystallization is an “ongoing and dispersed process of making meaning through multiple epistemologies and genres, constituted in a series of separate but related representations based on a data set” (Ellingson, p. 126). For this project, I pursued an integrated, patched crystallization approach.

Patched crystallized accounts produce separate sections, each using a specific genre. The author then connects and intertwines them in the introductory and transitory remarks. Ellingson describes the product of patched crystallization:

While linked in one manuscript, the pieces also function semi-autonomously as coherent individual texts, rather like a sampler quilt where each block is pieced together with triangles, squares, and other shapes that together reflect a distinct pattern; side by side, each block is different, yet related to those on either side of it (2009, p. 111).

Patched works play with the tension between different ways of knowing and ways of representing by allowing the reader to commit fully to one genre at a time. Readers are able to encounter each genre fully while remaining aware of the other patches. Similarly, researchers are able to operate within the frame of one genre at a time, rather than weaving the genres together simultaneously, which can be considerably more complicated.

Authors must, however, be careful to make connections between the patches; they must work together to create a whole: “Some disconnect between genres in a patched text may be productive and generative; too much can confuse and disorient” (Ellingson, 2009, p. 112). For the purposes of this study, I created three patches that, while separate, overlap, co-mingle, and entangle to create a crystallized project that engages with the issues of voice, advocacy, and foster children at multiple levels.

A key benefit of the study is the consideration of multiple publics in the design. The scholarly conversation and activism are blended in this approach. Activism and political implications are not an afterthought, but literally one-third of the purview of the project. Another benefit is that the patched design allows for flexibility and change throughout the study. Finally, the proposed study design provided me with personal



fulfillment. It allowed me to weave my passion for research and my penchant for activism into the dissertation project. It also enabled me to operate within the ideological framework of feminism. I will now describe the three patches that comprise the project.

### *Patches*

The project is composed of three patches with distinct data analysis and representation procedures. The first patch is a “traditional” conceptualization of critical ethnography, the second patch involves the creative production of a script, and the third patch offers an activist agenda for the project. The patches address the following research questions:

RQ1: How is voice constructed, constrained, and challenged within AFK?

RQ2: How do AFK staff and volunteers practice advocacy?

#### **Patch One: Mapping Voices**

For the first patch, data were collected through critical ethnography, analyzed through grounded theory as developed by Charmaz (2006), and presented through evocative social science writing. According to Ellingson’s (2009) continuum, this patch is a middle-ground approach.

*Critical Ethnography.* The data for the first patch consists of interviews with volunteers and staff, observations of interactions in the CASA offices and in the courtroom, and self-reflexivity. The data collection method for this patch was critical ethnography. Ethnographic research employs the tools of participant observation, interviews, and reflexivity to interrogate, analyze, and ultimately understand a context and phenomenon. These elements combine to create a thorough picture of a site,

facilitating the gathering of data that describe and explain “the meaning of lived experiences for several individuals about a concept” (Creswell, 1998, p. 51).

Ethnography features prominent emphasis on reflexivity, the ability to “turn back on our self the lens through which we are interpreting the world” (Goodall, 2000, p. 137).

Within the processes of interviewing, observing, reading, and self-reflecting, I adopted a critical ethnographic framework to these practices as well as to the project as a whole. This critical lens reminded me to carefully consider ethical issues, bring to light the influence of power and control, and be aware of researcher status during data collection. Madison explains the ethics to the critical ethnographer: “By ‘ethical responsibility,’ I mean a compelling sense of duty and commitment based on moral principles of human freedom and well-being, and hence a compassion for the suffering of living beings” (2005, p. 5). Thus, ethical issues are foregrounded in research execution, data analysis, and data representation for critical ethnographers. As a researcher, I considered the consequences of asking questions as well as the consequences of representing people in a particular way. For this project, I carefully reflected on the ethics and implications of the research process in fieldnotes and in conversation with other scholars. In the above quotation, Madison also highlights the importance of compassion during the research project. I approached my research participants with compassion and kindness and attempted to understand rather than judge the participants. At times, this became difficult as participants disclosed biases to me.

Beyond self-reflection and consideration of ethics, a critical ethnography “takes us beneath surface appearances, disrupts the status quo, and unsettles both neutrality and

taken-for-granted assumptions by bringing to light underlying and obscure operations of power and control” (Madison, 2005, p. 5). A critical ethnographer troubles the coherent narratives often presented by stakeholders about an organization. I approached AFK as a power-laden context and attuned myself to contradictions, challenges, and expressions of power and control that permeate institutions. I focused on the material consequences of the power structures that operate within the organization. As a consequence of this orientation, I am invested in contributing to “emancipatory knowledge and discourses of social justice” (Madison, 2005, p. 5).

Further, the critical ethnographer reflects on the power of researcher status; as Madison (2005) highlights with regard to research participants, “you have the power to tell their story and to have the last word on how they will be represented” (p. 33). Similarly, Fontana and Frey (2008) assert that the interview is never a neutral tool. The interviewer makes choices about what to include, where to start and end quotes, and how to organize those quotes. According to Madison (2005), an interviewer and a participant are “in partnership and dialogue as they construct memory, meaning, and experience together” (p. 25). Therefore, instead of trying to erase myself from the interview, I sought to make myself equally vulnerable and open to the interviewee by responding to questions, taking time to deviate from the interview guide to offer encouragement or understanding, and framing the interview as a relational interaction first, and information-obtaining medium second. This involved seeking first to understand, rather than judge, interviewees’ comments, and opening my mind and heart to their perspectives (Madison, 2005). This style of interactive interview can open up dialogue,

free participants from anxiety about the experience, and allow the researcher to become vulnerable to the interviewee. A key way I destabilized the researcher-status was by letting the interviewee choose the location of the interview. Ten out of 16 interviewees chose their homes as the location of the interview, while the other six chose coffee shops, cafés, and, in one case, my home. By building trust with interviewees, some conversations lasted longer than the intended time and deviated from the interview guide. I welcomed this disruption as well, and allowed it to inform the research process.

*Participant Observation.* Participant observation involves participating as a member of an organization as well as observing, recording, and coding member interactions. Part of observation and reflexivity is taking fieldnotes. Fieldnotes are “firsthand accounts of an ethnographer’s participant observation” (Ellingson, 2007, p. 20) and “remain at the center of ethnographic inquiry” (p. 22).

I negotiated access to AFK with the Director of Advocates For Kids three months before fieldwork began. I approached Linda for an initial meeting to discuss my research project and gauge her interest in working together. I was familiar with the organization and its mission, and presented Linda with a research proposal. I requested access to: the Advocates For Kids offices for observation, the staff and volunteers to solicit interview participants, documents to understand the work that AFK accomplishes, and court proceedings to observe testimony of CASAs.

Linda told me that she was interested in my project and believed that Advocates For Kids could benefit from a partnership with me. She also explained her desire to protect the children with whom she works. She shared with me that part of AFK's work

is ensuring that children in foster care have access to one adult consistently throughout the process. She told me that children in foster care are constantly confronted with various adults demanding something from them and “we try to stop the revolving door of adults” in a foster care child’s life. I explained to Linda that it was also important to me to protect the children, but that I did not want to be another person talking about foster children without letting them express themselves. I didn’t want to be another person ignoring their voices. We decided that while I would not have direct access to the children, we would come up with a way to include their voices in my study.

After my initial meeting with Linda, I presented my proposal to my committee and submitted my application to the institutional review board. My application included an interview guide and observation protocol. Once I received IRB approval, I began volunteering twice a week for three hours in the office over a period of 12 weeks. Additionally, I observed 20 hours of training, and six hours in court. I also observed various fundraisers and community events for ten hours. In total, I spent 106 hours over a period of seven months observing during fieldwork.

These observation experiences yielded 85 double-spaced pages of field notes, and 11 audio files of spoken fieldnotes. Audio fieldnotes were taped after leaving the AFK offices, especially after late-night training sessions. Portions of the audio files were transcribed into the written fieldnotes. All of the audio files were retained.

*Interviews.* In addition to observations, I conducted interviews with staff and volunteers. I used three types of interviews: ethnographic, formal informant, and formal respondent (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). There are over 100 volunteers, and nine staff

members, in AFK. I conducted 16 formal interviews with staff and volunteers. The first interview was a formal informant interview with a friend, who is a key informant in the field. Informant interviews are used to aid the researcher in the construction of the scene (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Informants usually have significant experience in the site and can provide insight into the various customs and rituals thereof. My interview with this person helped me orient myself in the field. This interview occurred before my first week of fieldwork.

The remainder of the formal interviews began after three months of fieldwork, and consisted of respondent interviews. Respondent interviews are formal interviews that seek open-ended responses (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). They lasted from 45 minutes to 120 minutes, with the average interview lasting 60 minutes. I interviewed five men and eleven women, and the participants ranged in age from 25 to 70. I interviewed one board member, six staff members, and nine current Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASAs). The CASAs became participants by one of two means: each CASA was either approached by me at an event and given information about the study, or selected by staff members to receive a solicitation email from me. All CASAs were volunteers with a current case and at least one year of experience volunteering at the Bryan offices.

The interview guide was constructed with open-ended questions and changed slightly between staff and volunteers. It was designed to elicit stories of advocacy actions as well as stories of the role of communication. The guide was also designed to find out how the participants felt their voice was received within the organization.

The interview was constructed as a guide, rather than a strict questionnaire. Therefore, each interview deviated slightly from the original guide based on our conversation. Specifically, ethical dilemmas were discussed later in the interview guide to get people to open up after they had become comfortable.

To establish trust, I acted as a co-participant in the interview process. Specifically, I introduced into each conversation my own ideas, experiences as a child, and impressions of the organization. I also allowed each participant to “pass” on any question they felt uncomfortable answering. This only occurred once, during an interview when the participant made brief remarks and then indicated “that’s all I would like to say about that.”

After three interviews and a month of observation, I changed the interview guide to reflect the issues I noticed in my fieldnotes. I added the following questions:

- 1) A lot of a CASAs’ work involves determining and then defending the child’s “best interest.” How do you know what’s in the best interest of the child?
- 2) What do you do when your child’s best interest and expressed wishes conflict?
- 3) Some of the volunteers have shared that they feel isolated from other volunteers, would you agree with that?

These questions were based on my experiences in the organization and my reflections in fieldnotes. Some interviews strayed significantly from the guide, and lasted two hours or longer. It was important to me to linger on the topics the participant wished to discuss before redirecting the conversation to my notes. Appendix A includes the Interview Guide for the formal interviews conducted with staff and volunteers.

Throughout my fieldwork with Advocates For Kids, I took advantage of opportunities for ethnographic or in-situ interviews with staff and volunteers. Ethnographic interviews are informal, naturalistic interviews that occur in the field (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). These occurred while conducting field observations and interacting with participants. Specifically, I conducted ethnographic interviews while at the office, especially while I was working with one partner on a project. They were also conducted with a key respondent after a larger meeting. I spoke with this respondent in order to debrief what I learned during the meeting and ask questions. I took head and scratch notes during these interactions and elaborated on specific examples and questions in fieldnotes.

*Document Examination.* Additionally, I examined several documents during this project. Specifically, I examined: the volunteer training materials; the staff manual; the notes from the staff retreat; a survey of volunteers conducted by staff; the Facebook postings of AFK; the promotional materials for AFK Brazos Valley; local media coverage of AFK from The Eagle and KBTX (the only local media); current case files; the CASA national website and blog; and the Brazos Valley AFK website.

I wanted to include the child's perspective in my study, and I also wanted to be careful about how I did so. I did not want to be another adult walking into a child's life for an interview, and immediately walking out again afterward. I decided the best way to protect the children in foster care was to access their stories by reading published memoirs by former foster care children. This allowed me to gain insight into the experiences of children in foster care while protecting the children who are still in the



system. The books I read were: *Three Little Words*, by Ashley Rhodes-Courter (2009); *Growing Up in the Care of Strangers: The Experiences, Insights and Recommendations of Eleven Former Foster Kids* by Waln K. Brown and John R. Seita (2009); *Like Family: Growing Up in Other People's Houses* by Paula McLain (2004); *Hope's Boy* by Andrew Bridge (2008); *On The Edge of Unthinkable*, by Paula Kyle (2009). The memoirs allowed me to hear the experiences of children in foster care in their own voices, unmediated by the organization or the children's advocates. Reading these memoirs during fieldwork was an emotional experience, and I began writing poems in fieldnotes as a way of expressing my own emotions. Some of these poems are written from the perspective of a foster child, some are written from my perspective as a researcher, and some are written from my memories of growing up. These poems are interwoven throughout Chapters Three and Five.

*Data Analysis.* The data analysis technique for the first patch was grounded theory. Grounded theory analysis is conducted through coding, writing analytical memos, and theoretical sampling until saturation. Coding begins with initial, line-by-line coding that allows the researcher to become familiar with the data (Charmaz, 2006). The second step in coding is focused coding, when the researcher begins to see the emergence of themes. After coding, the grounded theory analyst begins writing analytical memos to illuminate patterns and articulate his/her thoughts, insights, and reactions to the data (Charmaz). Charmaz explains: "Putting things down on paper makes the work concrete and manageable—and exciting" (p.72). This process resulted in

multiple one- to two-page memos, and memos accumulated throughout the research project.

During initial coding, I produced six analytical memos, two on the topic of voice and four on advocacy. At this point, I was not satisfied. I had categories that were obvious, and did not seem to illuminate the data or the concepts in the literature review. I felt the data still held something untapped, and I set the memos aside. I then revisited the literature, and coded the data for a second time, which yielded three new analytical memos for voice and four new analytical memos for advocacy. After the second round of coding was complete, I expanded on each of the existing memos, and added one memo about the connection between voice and advocacy.

At this point, I began theoretical sampling, which can be described as sifting through relevant data to hone the categories that have been developed (Charmaz, 2006). This helped me push beyond mere discovery of patterns to the development of theory to understand the ways in which the patterns cooperate, conflict, and collide. I produced the writing that served as the social science writing in Chapter Three. Chapter Three consists of four intertwined pieces: social scientific writing, poems produced during data collection and analysis, field notes, and reflexive excerpts from my field notebook. These four types of accounts of the data are entwined to create the first patch of the project. This patch can be read as the “traditional” ethnographic account, and, as such, leaves many stones unturned. In fact, patch one is in part designed to problematize the very process and product of “traditional” social scientific research. Specifically, the data are presented with little resolution, no call to action, and little relevance to the general

public. Its goal is theoretical development, which is admirable, but relevant only to a specific audience. As such, the project includes two more patches designed to answer this call for relevance, action, and resolution.

### **Patch Two: Coming To Life**

Patch one is largely constructed through the institutional view of the foster care system. That is, for patch one I conducted interviews with the current staff and certified volunteers. I observed trainings and court proceedings. I presented the view from this institutional level, neglecting to a large degree the faces, voices, and bodies of the children in the system. Patch two, therefore, is designed to remedy this necessary oversight by focusing solely on the representation of and stories of the children in the foster care system.

The data used for patch two are interviews about the children with advocates, memoirs written by former foster care children, children's stories publicized on the national CASA website, and Wednesday's Child descriptions produced by the local and national offices.

The data presentation method is a script and live performance of blended, fictional narratives to protect and uplift the child's voice and the advocates' voices. The script is available to performance groups or CASA organizations via the interactive website (described further in patch three). This patch fits into the art/impressionist area on the continuum (Ellingson, 2009). In addition to facilitating greater awareness of AFK and its work, developing a performance helped me to understand and interact with my data in deep, meaningful ways. Conquergood (2002) explains that creative works as part

of research “offer a more accessible and engaging format for sharing research and reaching communities outside academia” and that “they are a strategy for staging interventions (p. 152).” Thus, the script and performance enable me to consider multiple publics and engage with the community. Dissecting and re-presenting the child’s voice via the production of a script engages the data in a different way than the analysis procedures in patch one.

Patch two invites the reader to connect primarily with the child’s experience, and demands identification with the conflicting emotions involved in the break-up of a family. It invites the reader to examine her own experiences as a child and/or parent through different eyes. It is designed to move the reader or audience member to action. Some scholars have noted that as a society, Americans suffer from “compassion fatigue” (Kinnick, Krugman, & Cameron, 1996). This describes the attitude that results from overstimulation of compassion as a result of “pervasive communication about social problems” (Kinnick, et al., 1996, p. 687). We are inundated with stories of sadness, grief, illness, and misfortune on the nightly news. Americans often disengage from these stories because we are used to them. Performance is a way of breaking down these barriers to action. Put more simply, it’s not that we don’t care about children in foster care, it’s just that there is so much to care about. Performance breaks down barriers between self and other, forcing the audience/reader to engage with the deep emotional journey through the foster care system. The goal of patch two is to present the child’s perspective, and to move the audience to action. Patch three then offers an activist agenda as a response to the first and second patches of the project.

**Patch Three: Follow Through**

The third patch builds upon the first and second patches, and could even be read as a response to the cognitive dissonance created by raising awareness about the realities of the foster care system. This process involves integrating research, stakeholder, and community perspectives, and requires a mindset of suspicion in order to uncover hidden aspects of the foster care system. The data include blogs, online articles, the founding documents of CASA, anti-CPS websites, and federal, state, and local reports on the foster care system. The data collection method utilized included researching news articles, government documents, blogs, as well as perspective gathering of those involved in AFK. Those affiliated with the advocacy of a cause have opinions about how the system helps or hinders them. By adopting a general perspective of suspicion, the activist is able to examine the power structures that color the daily realities of the group for which she advocates.

For this patch, the data analysis method was critical thinking, conversation with others, and soliciting responses to blogs, articles, and my website. The data presentation was writing letters to the editor about the issue and developing an interactive website to present the study to a general audience. The website consists of the following pages:

*Home Page.* On the home page you can click on an icon to follow one of six characters' stories. These characters include: two children in foster care, the researcher, two advocates, and a staff member of Advocates For Kids. Clicking on the icon leads to information about each of the players. The stories are composite stories created from the data collected for the project.

*Resources.* The resources page includes links to relevant information about the foster care system, CASA programs, laws about foster care, links to news articles and blogs, and links to other websites that have information relevant to the foster care system and CASA organization.

*Take Action.* The take action page includes a link to find out who your representative is and a sample letter or email to send in support of CASA programs”. It also includes other actions such as petitions, donations, and links to send family or friends a postcard inviting them to visit the website. It also includes links to articles that can be posted to Facebook or emailed to friends. It has a page to sign up for a blog carnival to raise awareness about foster care.

*Blog.* The blog will include monthly posts by the researcher and will also solicit guest blogs from those involved in or interested in the foster care system. Topics include: news about foster care in the US, perspectives from various people involved, book discussions, and reactions to the website. Readers can submit comments as well as posts for consideration for a guest blog.

This patch also fits into the art/impressionist area on the continuum (Ellingson, 2009). The website is: [www.ImaginedVoice.Com](http://www.ImaginedVoice.Com) After explicating the study design and data analysis procedures, I will now move to a discussion of the findings of the study.

### CHAPTER III

#### FINDINGS

In this chapter, I present the results of the critical ethnography. The chapter is divided into two parts. The first section addresses the first research question,

RQ1: How is voice constructed, constrained, and challenged within AFK?

I developed three categories of voice from the data: imagined voice, monitored voice, and stifled voice. This section also contains poems written from the perspective of a child in foster care. Because I could not interview the children directly, they are not included as participants in this chapter. However, the voice of the child is often neglected in the foster care system and I did not want this project to be another example of that. In order to keep the child's voice immediate, I have included poems in this section to express the voice of the child in foster care.

The second section addresses the following research question,

RQ2: How do AFK staff and volunteers perform advocacy?

I will argue that the key to the advocates' performance of advocacy is the performance of privilege. CASAs themselves are privileged and the families in the foster care system are not. CASAs are aware of their privilege, and they intentionally perform privilege in order to gain resources for the children and families they support.

#### *Imagined Voice*

In order to speak on behalf of the child under their care, CASAs must create a voice that is neither theirs nor the child's. This is the imagined voice. The imagined voice is a third voice, a voice that imagines the child reflecting back on her future. What

would she have wanted? What would she be glad for? This voice is imagined because it does not yet exist. It is a powerful voice because it refuses to adhere to the child's expressed wishes or the CASA's personal biases. Instead of imagining the "perfect family" and waiting for it, a CASA focuses on the best recommendation for that child's life.

As Lenny<sup>2</sup>, volunteer for two years, puts it:

Sometimes there is no such thing as a good recommendation. Sometimes you're choosing the best of a bad situation. I mean, the choices that you have, A B & C. They all may be somewhat bad. You're trying to figure out which one is going to be the least harmful. Ideally, you'd love for everybody to have June and Ward Cleaver. Unfortunately, we don't live in 1950s sitcoms. This is the real world and the real world says that sometimes you choose what's the least harmful of the situations involved.

Of course, the imagined voice is filtered through the individual CASA's worldview, but all of the CASA interviewees reported separating their personal beliefs from what is best for the child. Laura details: "And the child that is being adopted next week—church is very important to me and this family is not a church-going family. And so that was a little disappointing to me."

Jeanine similarly explained how she handled a conflict between her personal beliefs and the child's well-being:

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<sup>2</sup> Participants will be referred to by pseudonyms.



One of the children went with a gay couple and that was a little hard for me.

Though they are wonderful parents, I just sometimes worry, is it going to make the kid's life hard? What kind of sexual vices is he going to grow up with? But I had to recommend them— just because you know they're basically wonderful parents, I just decided that well, I just have to hope for the best.

Jeanine illustrates that separating personal beliefs from the child's imagined voice is an essential skill for a CASA. Even though she has a biased view of gay parents that leads her to fear that the child may develop "sexual vices," she still recommended that he be placed with gay parents. CASAs also have to detach from their personal feelings about people involved in the case in order to speak in the imagined voice. When asked about the most challenging part of being a CASA, Lenny shared:

Once you finally get your feet on the ground, it is maintaining your objectivity.

You meet some very unlikable people. And I'm not just saying the parents. There are some wonderful people, but there are some people that it is real easy to dislike. You can't let your personal prejudice against that individual influence your decision. You've got to step back from it and say, "I may personally really dislike this guy. I may think he is a terrible human being. But am I doing that because I personally dislike him or is it because I think he would be detrimental to the children?" You have to step back and constantly re-evaluate. Is any personal opinion coming into this? Or, are you still objective?

Lenny emphasizes that objectivity and setting aside personality differences is essential to speaking in the imagined voice. The imagined voice is not a parrot of the CASA's voice. Similarly, it is not a microphone for the child's voice.

CASAs do not always advocate for a child's expressed wishes. Marianne clarifies:

We as an organization are important because we give voices to children. We give the children a say. The ad litem attorney role is very different from the CASA, and they may not agree on what is best for the child. The ad litem attorney has to do what the children want. If the child says, "I want to go back to my mother," he has to say to the judge, "my client wants to go back to her mother and the CASA may say, that is not in the best interest of the child."

Interestingly, the CASAs and the organization AFK often refer to "being a voice for a child" and "speaking for a child" even though they do not necessarily advocate for what the child wants. This voice is connected to the child, but not yet. The advocates believe they are speaking for the child for the future. Lenny reveals:

The long term is where we're going to have an impact. I just finished a case working with a child that just turned a year old. Well, the decision we made is going to follow him at least for the next 17 years. And it may in fact, follow him his entire life. So it's an incredible responsibility because this judge very much listens to what the CASAs say. When you make that recommendation, you ought to have a lump in your throat, because no matter how confident you are, you don't know everything. And, you really are playing with people's lives.

Lenny positions his role as one that is primarily accountable to the future. He emphasizes that CASAs should be extremely concerned with the long-term impact of their work. In fact, Lenny sees his role as an intervention into the child's future:

And the terrible thing is, and it is what I keep telling people-- if we don't do something about this now, we're going to see these kids again. In a form that we're not going to like. Because when they're 19 or 20 and they've been through the system, and abused by the system, we'll see them again. And they will be doing things that make us say, "Why didn't somebody do something about that?"

Lenny is concerned about what will happen to these children as adults without any guidance. According to FosterCareMonth.org, approximately 200,000 children "age out" of the foster care system annually (n.d., para. 1). "Aging out" is defined as young people who are never adopted and remain in the foster care system when they turn 18. Only 2% of children who "age out" of the foster care system obtain a bachelor's degree, despite the fact that in most states, children who have "aged out" qualify for free college tuition (Pecora, Kessler, Williams et al., 2005).

I asked Marianne what she does when the child's expressed wishes and best interests conflict. She reflects:

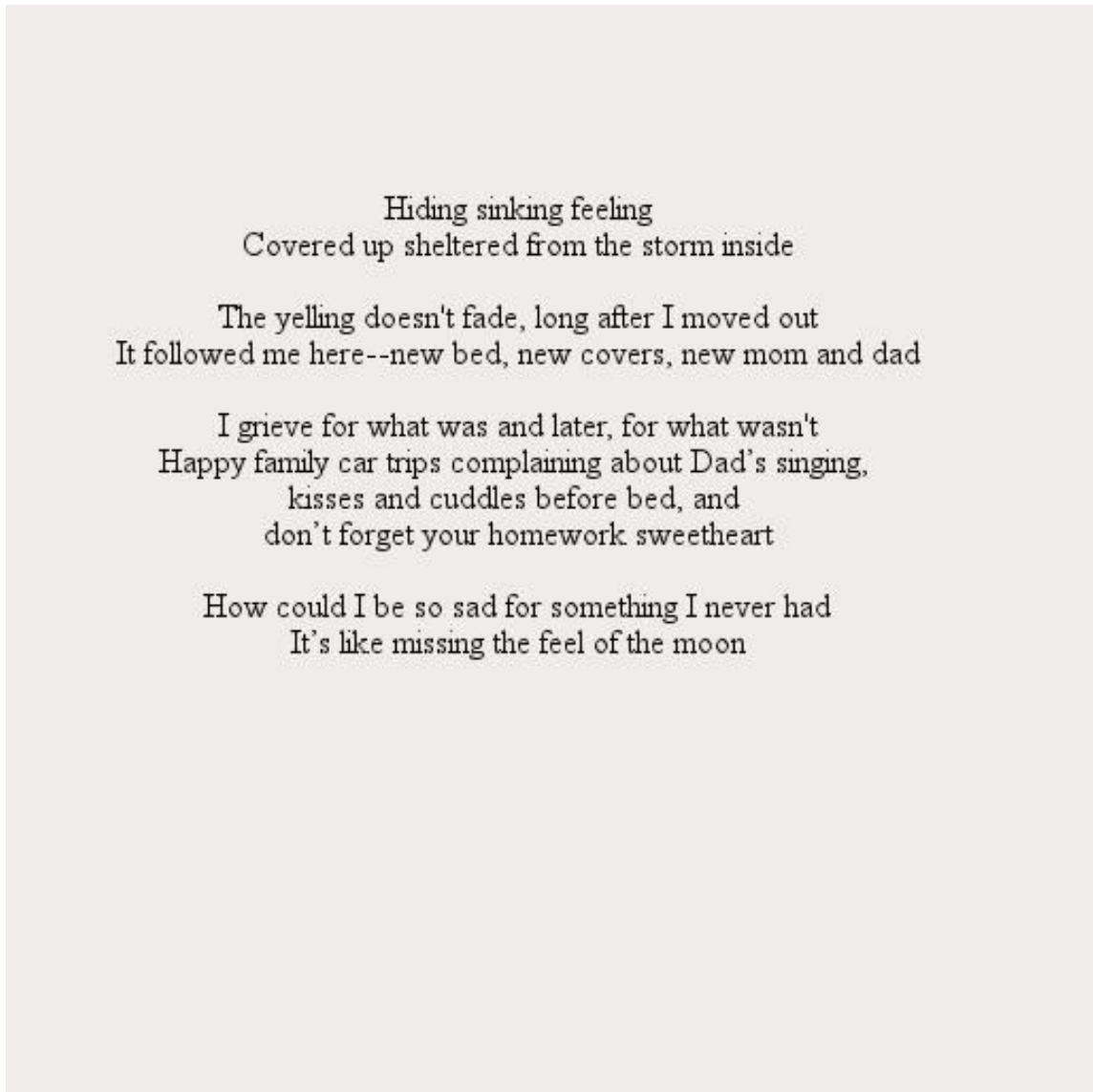
I actually haven't had to do that. I've been very lucky, particularly with the older kids. You just have to be a good advocate for what is in the child's best interest. You can't always get them to come around to your thinking. You may never accomplish that. We've had workshops where we've had older kids come back

and talk about their experiences and they'll say that their CASAs were right in the end.

Marianne confirms that CASAs are prepared for the likelihood that the children, especially the older ones, will not agree with their recommendations. CASAs therefore cannot gauge their effectiveness in the present. Their focus must remain on the future and the long-term effects of their advocacy. When asked how she determines what is in the child's best interest, Marianne explains:

My first case, the mother had placed the children in foster care because she felt like she couldn't take care of them, but then realized that she was the only one who really could take care of them. So she worked really hard to get her children back. When I came onto the case, it was really more of the monitoring stage, because it was really in the best interest of the children to go back to their mother. I look at the long-term consequences for the child. Where are the children in their development? That in a lot of ways will determine what is in their best interest.

The imagined voice is not the CASA's voice or the child's voice, but a third voice. The imagined voice speaks from a space between bodies because it is not connected to a material body. It transcends time as it communicates hope for the future. In order to advocate for the children in foster care, CASAs create an imagined voice that allows them to detach from their personal beliefs and focus on the child's best interest. Next is a poem (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Poem 1

### *Monitored Voice*

Monitored Voice refers to the ways in which the organization AFK oversees voice. The process of monitoring voice is not always bad, nor is it always innocent.

Monitoring voice includes staff monitoring other staff, staff monitoring volunteers, staff monitoring me as researcher, and me monitoring the participants voice as well. Voice is monitored:

- by court reports that are edited by staff
- through selecting some volunteers to move forward with training, and not allowing others to do so
- by limiting who I talked to for interviews
- through the design of the office
- by pulling volunteers off of cases
- through confidentiality agreements for volunteers
- by me while taking head and scratch notes during observation

A key way voice is monitored by the organization is through case assignments and check-ins with CASAs. The first step in assigning cases is connecting with AFK as an organization. A case can end up with a CASA in two ways: either the judge will request a CASA for a particularly difficult case or the child/sibling set can request a CASA. At this point, the case is assigned to the volunteer supervisor, who will match it to a volunteer. The supervisor reviews the case and decides who would be a good fit based on the volunteer's experience and age or location preferences. The volunteer coordinator then invites the volunteer in for a chat to see if he or she would like to accept the case. As Christie, volunteer coordinator, explains:

I supervise volunteers so when a case starts, the supervisor will match a volunteer with that case. So, just from the beginning there are certain duties that

each volunteer has to do, so making sure they are doing those. If they need help making contacts, I do that. If they're having problems with professionals, just making sure that things run smoothly so that they can be the best that they can be.

Christie sees her role as “helping” as well as making sure the volunteers are doing their jobs. An exemplar from fieldnotes demonstrates the case assignment process:

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I scheduled a meeting with Christie to watch her assign a case to a volunteer. I'm really curious about how they negotiate what needs to happen for each child. Christie invited the volunteer to come in and read about the case. We sat at the large table in front of the office. Anyone walking into the building or walking around the office would be able to hear us. This area is the training space, and I wondered why we weren't using the conference room. The conference room doesn't have any doors, but at least it has three walls.

The CASA volunteer, Judy, sat down across from Christie, and they made brief small talk. Christie then handed her a large blue file. I don't think Christie knew I had just assembled that file yesterday while volunteering in the office. It is filled with official papers from the judge ordering a CASA to the case, placing the children in foster care, and ordering the mother to complete drug tests. It also has the results of home visits by CPS, the agreement from the family group conference, and a police report. It has internal AFK paperwork as well—checklists and reports on the status of the case and the family.

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<sup>3</sup> This symbol used to bracket fieldnote excerpts.

It's the dirty laundry of a family in crisis, and Christie waits while the Judy reads everything. Christie watches the volunteer and after about 20 minutes asks, "So, do you have any questions?"

Judy reviews a few details about the children—ages, names, are they in therapy? What's the timeline for this case? Christie answers and then both women fall silent.

"So, what do you think?" Christie finally speaks. "Are you interested?"

"Yes, I'll take it," Judy nods.

"Great, let's go over the checklist."

Christie reviews the checklist of initial tasks and the monthly tasks and assigns a date by which each task needs to be done. They decide to make initial contact with the mother together. The case file stays here, so Judy takes notes of important information. They make a plan to visit the home the next day. After Judy leaves, Christie tells me she usually accompanies the volunteers on their first contacts with the family.

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As illustrated in the example above, the case is assigned to a volunteer by the staff of the organization, and specific tasks are assigned to be completed by certain dates. Staff members monitor what information the volunteers receive, and when they receive it. Further, AFK staff members are aware of each contact made between the volunteer and anyone on the case because these contacts are reported in the case log and kept in the file. At first, volunteer coordinators typically accompany the volunteers on visits to home, school, or doctors, depending on the volunteer's comfort level.



Each month, the volunteer and his/her coordinator conduct a “case review.” At the case review, the coordinator and volunteer fill out the checklist together and make a log of the volunteer’s activities involving the case. Each time the volunteer makes a phone call, visits a teacher, or sends an email, it is recorded in the case log. The coordinator will compare the volunteer’s report to the plan that was made at the previous case review. For example, certain duties such as visiting the parent(s) need to happen once a month. So if the volunteer has not visited the parent(s) lately, the coordinator will ask why and when it can be done. In this way, the coordinator monitors the volunteer’s activities related to the case. Each contact is reported and evaluated by the coordinator. An exemplar from fieldnotes illustrates a case review:

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Before I sat down, Katie asked the volunteer Margaret if it was okay if I sat in on the case review. She seemed very suspicious of me. We were huddled around Katie’s desk in office chairs facing each other. Before she spoke, Margaret adjusted her chair to only face Katie. It occurred to me that she was clearly uncomfortable with an “outsider” listening to their conversation, even though we were seated in the middle of the office where anyone could hear us. I smiled a lot, and tried to explain who I was. Eventually, Katie shrugged and went about the usual meeting process which began with the checklist. “Did you visit with the children this week? Oh, you have it scheduled for tomorrow? Don’t forget because that visit is important. What did the therapist say?” I had reviewed the file and signed a confidentiality agreement, but Margaret still seemed extremely uncomfortable with me as I watched them chat. Finally she asked Katie,

“Does Larissa know about this?” Larissa is the head of the organization, and I bit my tongue though I felt compelled to defend myself. I kept smiling. Katie paused to look at me and then chimed in, “Yeah, of course.” The meeting lasted a half hour, and I left feeling more like an outsider than ever.

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This example shows how I became a way that voice is monitored in the organization. By taking notes and asking to sit in on meetings, staff and volunteers viewed me as an observer. This is another way that voice was monitored in the fieldsite.

CASAs can also be removed from a case. Lenny shares:

I’ve never had a case where I made a recommendation and the judge said, “We’re not doing that.” The CASA before me in this case, he was extremely upset that the judge didn’t do what he said, which was reunite the children with his parents. CPS was adamantly opposed to it. That is why we’re in this six-month period after the trial trying to figure out what to do. The poor judge was sitting here listening to the CASA tell him that “These parents are the greatest in the world and they’re loving parents and they’re salt of the earth.” And CPS calling them the devil incarnate. What’s going on here?

In this case, AFK removed the CASA and assigned the case to another volunteer. Lenny was the only one willing to tell me a story about someone being removed from a case. Other volunteers hinted at this practice during interviews, but no one would explicitly discuss it.

Coordinators also edit the court reports that the volunteers write and give to the judge before a court date. Nicole, volunteer coordinator, considers court report writing a main responsibility of her job:

I think another big part of my job would be the formal part of court report writing. Guiding the volunteer through that process just because the language that you use is different, many of them had never had to write in that way before. So doing that, and helping them decide which facts are important for the judge to know, and which ones aren't.

Nicole details how she helps edit the reports:

As a coordinator I think that's one of the biggest challenges because we don't want to invalidate what they're doing and you want to continue to make them think that it is important that you are at every visitation and that you see all these little things that are going on with the case. But the court report isn't necessarily the forum in which we communicate these things. The judge usually reads it in court right before the case, so it has to be short. But we don't want to offend the volunteers or to make them think that what they're doing isn't important, so you have to walk a very thin line with that.

Volunteers have a different perspective on the court report editing. Sarah feels frustrated by the process:

So here's what they do: you write a report, and then they'll sort of edit it and send it back to you. Well a lot of times in their edits, they'll put what they really want to hear in a different color ink, so I just change the ink color. Because I've

tried that, where I would send it back in my own words, and they keep sending it back to me different, and I'm like well, fine. If this is how you want, it, why don't you just type it in black yourself?

When asked if she feels that the organization censors her, Sarah replies:

Sometimes there's a little bit of that, they do want you to change your idea. And I'm old enough to say "This is exactly what I meant to say, this is what I want to convey, I'm leaving it." It has to be approved by the highest supervisor, and then it gets sent off. Sometimes I'll have even my volunteer coordinator look at it, and then she'll give it to the supervisor if she's getting nowhere with me, and the supervisor will say something to me. But I am confident enough to stick to my guns on some of my issues. They don't always just toe the CPS line, they let you have some autonomy. But we've had a little bit of that butting heads.

When asked if there been any particular incidents where the staff was particularly supportive or could have been more supportive, Shauna reflected:

There was one specific instance where I was very clear about something that I wanted in my court report and it was a huge deal and directly related to the care of the children and their future. I was asked to not put that in there and I was not okay with that. So I discussed that. We went back and forth on that, and in the end I said, if it can't be in there, I can't do my job. I even went and spoke to Larissa about it and it was fine. I think there could be more support. More support in how I do my job and less nitpicking of little stuff that to me is not quite as important as what needs to happen in court.

The volunteer's voice is strictly monitored by the organization through court report writing and editing. As mentioned earlier, this is not necessarily a bad thing. It is important, for example, that the court reports are short enough for the judge to scan as (s)he enters court. However, some volunteers perceive that their every word is monitored by the organization and its staff; indeed, Sarah says she becomes so frustrated that she changes the report to reflect exactly what the staff wants.

Diana agrees that writing the court report is very stressful, but notes that there are ways around being censored by the organization:

Sometimes you feel real strongly about something and you want to say it stronger than they'll let you. But what I have learned is Judge Dilloughery, who is our family court judge right now – you're not intimidated by him. I'm still nervous of Judge Delaney, but he's real good about asking CASA's opinion and then you feel like you really can talk. So if there's something really, really bothering you, you could really say it in Judge Dilloughery's courtroom.

The courtroom is arguably the forum in which the CASA has the best chance to speak freely. Though representatives from AFK are present, if the judge asks for the CASA's opinion, she can answer without checking with staff or anyone. Because the judge makes decisions and orders services in court, the CASA's testimony during court is influential.

The design of the office also allows for the organization to constantly monitor voice of staff and volunteers. There is a conference room that has no door, and the cubicles are lined up on one wall, facing the wall. This results in the back of the staff member and her computer being visible to the office all the time. There are no dividers

between the cubicles. Across the room are two offices with the head of the organization and a supervisor. These offices have doors that are usually kept open. As a result, everyone can overhear phone conversations. During observation, I often noticed that after a staff member hung up the phone, another staff member or a supervisor would approach her and comment on the phone call. These comments consisted of reprimands, corrections, or opinions about how the staff member handled the phone call. The volunteer coordinators see themselves as a team even though they each have specific cases that usually do not overlap. This kind of feedback and eavesdropping is common because of the physical layout of the office. If a coordinator wants to meet with a volunteer privately, they use a café nearby. Some volunteers noted during interviews that they dislike meeting in the office because everyone can hear the conversations.

In addition to the physical layout, the organization monitors the voice of the supervisors through regular meetings. These meetings occur with the volunteer coordinator's supervisor and consist of a case-by-case review of the coordinator's work and the volunteers on each case. The supervisor and the head of the organization also meet once a month to summarize the information on current cases. However, the staff also has staff meetings where information is shared and summarized.

Throughout my time at AFK, my voice was monitored as well through controlling who I contacted for interviews and what meetings I was allowed to attend. An excerpt from fieldnotes illustrates the way my voice was monitored during a staff meeting.

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I'm standing by Vanessa's desk, making small talk while she sorts through documents on her computer. It's ten past two and I'm waiting for the staff meeting to begin. I usually come in on Tuesdays and Thursdays, but Vanessa clacked away at her keyboard as I strained to turn her monosyllabic responses into a conversation.

"So, I'm going out to First Friday this weekend. Are you planning to go?"

"Maybe, it depends."

"That's cool, your daughter probably likes all the kids activities, right?"

"Yeah."

People started to filter into the conference room. "Looks like the meeting is starting"

"Yeah, I have to go to the staff meeting now."

"Oh right, that's why I'm here on a Friday. I'm going too!"

Vanessa walked toward the conference room, smiling and chatting with her colleagues. I followed, feeling like an unwelcome guest at a family dinner.

Nine staff members attended the meeting, one with her new baby. Anna led the meeting with "staff spotlight," a ritual where staff member's accomplishments are highlighted. Even though everyone is already aware of the achievements, Anna likes to begin each staff meeting on a positive note. I glanced at the agenda and noted that my name was first, followed by current case summaries from each of the staff members.

Anna asked me to explain my research project to the staff, and then she continued: "It's not required that you interview with Shelly, but if you do, feel free to take an hour of paid time to do so. Just categorize it as 'administrative' on your work logs."

All the women seemed at ease, laughing and joking each time the baby made a funny face. After we are done discussing my project, Anna said, “Okay Shelly, you’re welcome to go! I know you don’t usually come in on Fridays.” Everyone paused the chatting to smile politely at me. “We’ll get in touch with you with some volunteer names for interviews. Have a good weekend!”

“Oh, um. Okay.” I gathered my notebook and the room stayed silent until I left. I had planned on staying around for the staff meeting and I discussed it with Anna. Maybe I wasn’t clear? Maybe they had something confidential to discuss? I collected my purse and walked toward the exit just as a round of giggles filled the office. The baby must be at it again, I thought.

I processed as I headed for my car. The staff were very polite to me, but not warm and friendly as with each other. I consistently felt like an outsider, despite my attempts to make small talk and my offers to help. I still felt like they were suspicious of me and my intentions, even though I had been volunteering at the office for two months. How could I break down this barrier? Was it something I had done? Did anybody else feel this way?

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In addition to monitoring my voice during meetings, the organization controlled who I was allowed to contact to solicit interviews. An excerpt from fieldnotes about a meeting with the head of the organization reveals this.

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I walked into Larissa's office for our meeting. "I'd like to start interviewing staff and volunteers."

Larissa smiled, "Sure, how many people?"

"My goal is 25, the only criteria is that they have been working with AFK for at least a year. Could I have the volunteer contact email list?"

Larissa tilted her head. "Well, I think we will help you find people. I will talk to the five volunteer coordinators and we will select five each we think would make good interviews."

"Oh, thank you, I appreciate the offer but people often don't want to participate so it helps to contact a bigger group. It would be great if I could email everyone to offer the opportunity to participate."

"Well we wouldn't want you to end up interviewing people on really crazy cases. We'd like you to talk to the best volunteers so you can really get a feel for our work. We will send you 25 names and email addresses," she stated firmly. "Is there anything else you need?"

"I'd like to sit in on some meetings, some case reviews and maybe the air and share meeting where volunteers come talk about their feelings."

"We'll see. I'm not sure the people running those meetings would like you there, I will email them and check."

"Oh okay, I'm happy to email too and explain who I am and what I need."

"No, I will do it."

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A week later, I received an email with 25 names and email addresses. This was frustrating for me because it meant that the staff would know the pool of people I had interviewed, compromising some issues of confidentiality. Further, I assumed the staff would not select people with differing opinions or experiences but rather volunteers with the “ideal” disposition toward the organization. In order to manage these issues, I solicited volunteers at each of the events I attended. I was able to get three interviewees with volunteers who were not specifically selected by Larissa for the study. Another key issue of voice in fieldwork was the way voice was stifled. Next is a poem (Figure 2).

My friends play little league, soccer moms in vans after school offer  
homemade cookies and extra time for TV

I don't want to go home  
Home where I don't own anything, not even my clothes

Everything is for sharing, including her punishment  
Eight of us share bath water

Blame and tattle to save ourselves from  
locked in the cupboard licking hot sauce, bleeding  
There is no home here, only empty space where home should be

She says it's all my fault  
I'm scared she's right

**Figure 2.** Poem 2

*Stifled Voice*

Stifled voice refers to voices that are suppressed, ignored, or dismissed. It describes voices that are contrarian and concealed. These voices are not more “true” or “accurate” than other voices, but they are missing from the dominant narratives about children and AFK as an organization. For example, overmedication is a common

problem for children in foster care. Recently, the television program 20/20 conducted a yearlong investigation into the issue. They discovered that “doctors are putting foster children on powerful, mind-altering drugs at rates up to 13 times that of children in the general population” (Adhikari, Martelli & Koch, 2011).

### **“They don’t get any say in life”: Foster Children**

One group of stifled voices belongs to the children in foster care in the United States. Laura, a volunteer, explains:

I just really have a heart for children because they get put in situations that they don’t have any control over. You know, adults to a certain extent have control over their situation but children don’t. And somebody needs to be their voice, be their advocate. They need somebody to speak for them.

In this quotation, Laura understands her role in relationship to stifled voice. She volunteers because children in foster care have stifled voices. She emphasizes that children need someone to speak for them. Chad agrees: “The children in foster care know they’ll be in the system until they’re 18. They don’t get any say in life.” Chad also refers to the lack of control that children have over their own lives. Interestingly, CASAs are not taught to parrot the voice of the child for whom they advocate. Rather, they are encouraged to make the recommendation that they believe is in the child’s best interest, whether the child agrees or not. They do this by creating the Imagined Voice described earlier in this chapter. Therefore it could be argued that CASAs also stifle the voice of children in foster care, but do so for the children’s best interest. It is an ethically

complicated situation, especially as children in foster care demonstrate agency by manipulating the system that oppresses them.

Though their voices are stifled, children in foster care learn to manipulate the system. In Chapter One I introduced Chad and Joaquin. Chad shares: “Joaquin’s method to manipulate the system is to talk about suicide. So the Residential Treatment Center (RTC) would have to send him to a mental institution, and the law doesn’t allow for him to return to the same RTC. So they would never take him back. He’d spend two to four weeks in the mental institution, and then be sent off to another RTC where he’d start all over again.”

Chad reveals a story about another boy he worked with, Ryan: “Whenever the people that were taking care of Ryan insisted that he do things their way and needed to do chores, he found out how to get switched to another house.” As a consequence of moving frequently, Ryan’s schoolwork is suffering. Chad sighs:

It doesn’t help with school work because how can a kid do anything in high school if they’re not in one school for more than two to three months? He has new teachers, he’s got new courses, and sometimes you don’t get the same courses. You get to the point of there’s no point in doing any homework. It’s very discouraging for the kids.

Chad’s stories demonstrate that while the voices of the children in foster care are stifled, the children react by trying to manipulate the system to get what they want. In this case, Ryan was not benefitting in any particular way from moving around so much; he simply felt he had no other way to have control over anything in his life. The lack of control

extends beyond a lack of possessions, home, or family; the children in foster care lack control over their health.

A significant way foster child's voice is stifled is through overmedication. Roxy confides her frustrations with the psychiatric care Donovan is receiving:

He has had four caseworkers – has had four caseworkers, and at least seven therapists, he's been on 10 medications, and the information along the way gets really muddled. There was a couple of times where I'd be reading through reports, it's like, wait a minute that didn't happen! Each time he is moved, the caseworker has 14 days to contact the new RTC where Donovan is placed.

Which is a really long time. There was one time when I was fed up— She hadn't made contact with anyone and he had been there for eight days! They don't know bipolar disorder runs in his family. They don't know that he's allergic to Lexipro. They didn't know all the medications he was currently on. It's hard enough for him to keep track of all them. It was egregious.

Roxy believes that Donovan was overmedicated and not receiving proper psychiatric care. Unfortunately, Donovan's situation is common for children in foster care. As Gold (2011) reports, children in foster care are significantly more likely to be prescribed psychotropic drugs than other children covered by Medicaid, and more likely to be prescribed at higher doses and younger ages than the FDA approves. Children's voices are stifled through lack of control, inability to speak up, and overmedication.

**“I'm just going to give her enough rope to hang herself”: Parents in the system**

Another group whose voice is stifled in the foster care system is the birth parents.

Sharon, a CASA for three years, divulges:

I always get the caseworkers who are jaded because of what they've done and seen or something. The Mom I have now is kind of low-functioning, and has a mental illness. And the CPS worker said "Oh, I'm going to give her just enough rope to hang herself." Well that really shouldn't be the attitude. And the Mom isn't doing anything to hang herself. You don't give a mentally ill, low-functioning Mother rope to hang herself. She's doing her best. She's just not very capable. And for this CPS worker to feel like she's going to sit back and wait for her to fail.

Later, Sharon vents:

My other CPS caseworker was even meaner. She almost seemed to make up stuff. But the one caseworker right now doesn't have any children. Well I think you really need to have been a parent. I'll give you a little example.

In this person's house there is one room, and then a little step down into another room. The caseworker was insisting that they put a gate. And it wasn't like a doorway, you know, it was several feet. She was insisting they put baby gates all the way across this opening, from one end to another, and I said, "Why?"

"Well there's a step there, the children would fall!" You know what? Lots of people have babies in two-story houses with big stairs! I said "Kids fall, kids trip, kids bump their lip, kids bump their heads." The baby is going to take a

tumble, the toddler, he's going to fall off the sofa one time, he's going to roll off a bed, I mean it just happens. You cannot force these parents, who are disadvantaged in many ways—I mean if she's going to do that, we should pad all the walls with foam, and put helmets and elbow pads and knee pads on everybody! And you know, you just can't do that. I was like, "Don't you know that things happen and it's okay?" and "Kids will have to learn how to step down the stairs," you know?

So the mom goes into the kitchen to cook and puts a baby gate up, so the kids can't even come in the kitchen. What normal kid doesn't go in their mom's kitchen? I mean, that's how kids learn to cook, and stir, and bake cookies with mom. So these kids aren't allowed in the kitchen because of the caseworker, and so the mom says "Oh, if Ms. Bernice saw them in the kitchen, I'd be in trouble."

Sarah, a CASA for four years confides: "Some parents they [CPS] really pick on, the psychologist for this case said for some reason CPS appears to be harder on this mother than they are on everybody else. And on my other case, their counselor quit working with them through CPS because she can't stand what CPS does. She still works with them, but gets paid through another grant instead."

CPS as an organization is run by people and guided by bureaucracy. The CPS caseworkers have a lot of freedom to discern what they believe is best for the children and the parents involved. Sarah and Sharon's stories reveal that the system is not always fair, and that the parent's voice is often stifled. In some cases, the parent's voice needs to



be stifled to determine best interest for the child. However, as these stories demonstrate, the stifling of the parent's voice can frustrate people involved in the case. A story from observation exemplifies the way the parent's voice is stifled in the courtroom.

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I sat in the back of the courtroom and observed the flurry of activity. Lawyers, caseworkers, CASAs, supervisors all flitted between private conversations gathered in separate corners. All I could hear was gossip about the case. We were waiting for the judge and the mom under investigation. The judge entered, and the room quieted. The lawyer for CPS and the mother's lawyer approached the judge as he sat down. "We're still waiting for her, Your Honor," the CPS lawyer announced with an eye roll. "She's over thirty minutes late."

"I'll check and see where she is" her lawyer Tony chimed in. "I'll just step outside and call her."

I think to myself: The games have begun.

For the lawyers, every word is an opportunity to gain the judge's support. Every argument a chance to win points, to appear to be on the "right" side. To win.

A few minutes later, the mother's lawyer, Tony, rushes back up to the bench.

"She went to the wrong courthouse, the one we were supposed to meet at originally—"

The CPS lawyer interrupts, "Your Honor, I sent her several reminders that we changed the courtroom."

“I reminded her as well, I told my assistant to text her,” Tony declared with a shrug.

Twenty minutes later, Latoya entered the room, flustered. She’s the only person of color in a room of thirty people, I thought to myself. A few minutes later, Latoya’s brother and mother sit down next to me.

Court begins, and the CPS lawyer gives the Judge updates on the children—their behavior, placement, progress in therapy, and the options available for future placement. She also updates the judge about Latoya. Latoya has weekly calls scheduled with her children, and she has to call the CPS caseworker at a certain pre-arranged time to talk to her children.

“She has missed two calls in the last two months. The children were really disappointed. And on one of them she seemed really out of it, like she was possibly on something,” the CPS caseworker testified.

Latoya was shaking her head, “I tried to—”

Tony scolded her, “No, not now, you have to wait.”

CPS testimony continued for another fifteen minutes and covered a variety of issues. Eventually, it was Latoya’s and Tony’s turn to speak. “My client called in on one of the times mentioned, and there was no answer. She left a voicemail. On the second missed call, she was late getting back from work. She would like permission to arrange two calls a week at the foster home, instead of having to call during the day because of work.”

I start to wonder what really happened with the missed calls. There's no way to prove either story. I notice that Latoya's lawyer is fighting hard, but not on her behalf exactly. It seems more like he didn't want to lose.

The hearing turned back to the subject of the two children, one of whom is special needs. The CPS caseworker begins "Shanna has Spineabifida—" Latoya's brother and mother next to me are holding hands, and they both plead, "Shaniqua." Though they are quiet, the caseworker hears them and corrects herself. "I mean Shaniqua. She has spineabifida, and ..."

The pain of the two people next to me is palpable. I feel sick to my stomach.

The caseworker continues: "We're not sure about a family placement, because we don't know that she will be taken care of."

"She will," the two voices next to me plead in concert. But they aren't heard because they aren't allowed to talk. Latoya was looking down and her lawyer was whispering to her.

Tony's indifference to her was obvious. During the hearing at various points he lectured her (take your hands out of your pockets), talked down to her (the judge doesn't want to hear everything you say, keep it short), and scolded her (what did I tell you about talking out of turn?) I could hear his reprimands from my seat in the audience, so I assume most people in court could hear them as well.

It was heartbreaking. He is supposed to be the voice of support, her voice. He represented her interests, but he belittled her. I felt like everyone in the room forgot what we were fighting for—a family. I walked away wondering, can we negotiate for

someone we don't care about? What are the consequences of a system of negotiation in which the primary participants are muzzled and forced to communicate through someone else's voice?

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While issues of voice and advocacy are consequential in many situations, the impact is especially pronounced in the foster care system. As illustrated by the previous story, the foster care system is characterized by disparate voices, ethical gray areas, and conflicting goals.

The decisions carried out by each key player have lasting consequences for the families involved. The foster care system's success relies on the advocacy of each party, and the decisions the judges make are based on the voices of each player. Voice has material as well as emotional consequences on the families involved in the system. In reaction to their voice being suppressed, some parents have formed anti-CPS groups.

**“Let the children of the innocent return to their homes”: FightCPS**

Like children in foster care, parents fight back against the system. There is an anti-CPS website called FightCPS. According to the website, “FightCPS is intended to help people learn enough about the law to be able to successfully defend themselves and their families against false accusations using legal documents and strategies that put parents in a stronger position when they go back to court.” There are multiple websites run with a similar mission, and many blogs by families who report that they are undergoing CPS investigation. I chose FightCPS to represent this group of voices because it is the most extensive website I found on the issue. FightCPS has multiple

pages devoted to action items such as “How to sue CPS in court” and “What to do if your family is under investigation.” It also has a message board with over 16,000 active members.

The site alleges, “CPS has devastated and destroyed hundreds of thousands of families in America during the last thirty years leaving a trail of broken hearts, broken dreams, and shattered childhoods.” The group believes that CPS is to blame for families breaking up. This is interesting for multiple reasons. First, it is the Judge him/herself who orders the child to be removed and placed in foster care, or to terminate parents’ rights (eventually). Second, by referencing “families,” the group positions parents as victims of the system along with the children.

The site insists:

Rather than helping families, government agents have used unconstitutional laws in Juvenile Court to rip children away from their loving parents, break asunder God-given, natural, parent-child bonds, and adopt the children of the grieving out to others who profit financially with large monthly adoption subsidy payments.

The website distinguishes between the “natural” family as “God-given” and therefore innocent, while adoptive families are only caring for children for the money. Further, the site emphasizes again the role of parents as victims with phrases such as “children of the grieving.” Interestingly, the website also ambiguously references the Constitution and Juvenile court in order to argue that this particular government agency is operating outside of U.S. laws. The language here is almost Biblical, with the words “break

asunder.” Elsewhere, the mission statement asserts “Family rights are God-given rights.” The group invokes the Christian religion to further establish the parents as innocent and CPS as interlopers into the “natural” family. The group contends that CPS needs to be fought not only in individual cases, but at a systemic level.

The site pleads for foster parents and CPS workers to “come to their senses.” “CPS workers and fosterers - I ask that you now let the children of the innocent return to their homes where they are truly valued, adored, and loved by the parents God gave them.” CPS workers and foster parents are established as the enemies of the “innocent” “God-given” parents. The website specifies:

Child Protective Services must be stopped! The law that started this, CAPTA, must be repealed. We must work tirelessly to inform the public of this very dangerous travesty of justice. We must keep faith knowing that if there is a God, there is an answer and a way to end this heartache.

In this quotation, FightCPS calls for the total elimination of CPS. Though the group claims to advocate for those parents facing “false accusations,” it is clear in this quotation that the group is against all CPS actions. It does not believe that CPS is necessary for any child. Elsewhere in the mission statement, the work of CPS is referred to as “terrorism” and “torture.” The site proclaims that its mission is: “To provide information and support for families attacked by Child Protective Services and child welfare agents, especially those families facing false or trivial accusations of child abuse or neglect.” The site claims to provide support for all families involved in CPS cases,

“especially” those who are innocent. The site appears either unconcerned with child abuse and neglect or unconvinced that it exists.

The group is not just an information resource, however. This network fighting against CPS extends beyond support in the virtual world. I heard about FightCPS while observing a meeting between CPS and AFK. In this meeting, the two groups review each case AFK is assigned to, and discuss their thoughts and plans. The two groups don't always agree, but they meet once a month to talk together. Below is an excerpt from fieldnotes during a CPS-AFK meeting when a CPS staffer was discussing a child with several broken bones:

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“Well the parents found a doctor in Ohio, or Iowa, I forget, who will testify that the eleven broken bones are just ‘part of growing up’ and could have happened ‘naturally.’ He never even examined the child, they just sent him the X-rays and a bunch of money. The mom told me that. They found him through FightCPS or one of those groups. Her lawyer is really anti-CPS. The whole thing is just not helpful.”

I sighed and made note of the group's name. It's frustrating to know that parents spend so much time and energy being anti-CPS when they could instead be turning their lives around. Yes, I can imagine it's frustrating to have someone tell you how to live your life— where to work, who to date, where to live. But isn't getting sober, getting a job, and finding a safe place to raise your kids easier than trying to buck the system? Isn't that what you'd do if you really wanted your kids back? The number one goal of every CPS case is reunification. The parents' attitudes play a huge role in CPS and AFK

deciding whether reunification is possible. I feel like these parents are being preyed upon by people advancing their own political agenda and pursuing their own personal financial success.

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FightCPS and other similar groups exist to give a voice to the parents who feel unfairly targeted by CPS. The birth parents feel that they are being unfairly targeted, and they have little recourse. They are not permitted to speak freely in court, contact their children without supervision, or control when CPS visits. The parents turn to FightCPS for strategies to gain a voice. Unfortunately, the group advocates an antagonistic attitude and game-playing which does not help the parents get their children back. Next is a poem (Figure 3).



In the space where laughter should be, there is silence

Aching seething needy fear-- no one's home for you  
You've done something wrong again

At least you can cry aloud without getting in trouble  
You worry they'll never come back

Hours later they return, your eyes are puffy from the pain  
Hi, how are you? We had so much fun today

I'm sorry, I'm sorry for everything I have ever done  
For everything you think I did, I'm sorry

Please don't leave me again  
They smile and say okay sweetie, don't worry.

It all happens again tomorrow.

**Figure 3. Poem 3**

In the preceding section, I introduced three categories of voice present in the work of Advocates For Kids: Imagined Voice, Monitored Voice, and Stifled Voice. I described how the volunteers create an Imagined Voice in order to put the child's needs

above their own personal beliefs. I explained the ways in which the organization oversees the voice of the staff and volunteers which creates Monitored Voice. I illustrated the ways in which some voices are suppressed or dismissed generating Stifled Voice. I also crafted three poems to represent the voice of the child throughout this chapter. After delineating the issues of voice, the chapter turns to a discussion of issues surrounding advocacy.

*“If you can’t put yourself in somebody else’s shoes,  
you’re not going to be a good CASA”:*

*Performing Privilege as Advocacy*

This section answers the research question "How do CASAs perform advocacy?" After coding and data analysis it became clear that there was no straightforward answer to the research question, and this section was developed to address the ethical problem of advocating for another person as described by Alcoff (1991). In her piece, Alcoff reveals several ethical dilemmas that confront an advocate, and offers guidelines for performing advocacy. Her first guideline is that we should resist the impulse to advocate for another person. How can this idea be rectified with the responsibility of privilege? The data from this project reveal that advocates perform privilege in order to advocate for the children with whom they work.

First I will argue that the CASAs themselves are privileged and the families in the foster care system are not. Second, I will argue that CASAs are aware of their privilege, and that they intentionally perform privilege in order to gain resources for the children and families they support.

### **Privilege, Poverty, and Disproportionality in the CPS system**

CASAs themselves are a privileged group of people as they are mostly white and members of the middle-upper class. This is supported by the data available about the volunteers. First, all of the CASAs I interviewed and most of the CASAs at AFK are white. In Texas, 80% of all CASAs are white (Chambers, 2012). White Privilege is a concept that describes the unearned benefits of being white in the U.S. McIntosh, one of the first scholars to discuss white privilege, describes it as

an invisible package of unearned assets which I can count on cashing in each day but about which I was ‘meant’ to remain oblivious... like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools and blank checks (1989, p. 1).

Second, it is likely that most or all of the CASAs I interviewed are members of the middle to upper class. This is exemplified by the fact that they have the time and resources to attend the 30-hour training and commit to spending at least 10 hours a month on their cases for at least a year. In reality, the cases take around 25-30 hours a month, according to the interviewees. Some CASAs even report spending 10 hours a week on their case. This amount of time is a luxury that is not afforded to members of the working class.

CASAs also have to have resources to take time off of work to be in court, conduct meetings, and visit the children wherever they are currently placed. Texas is a large state, and though CPS attempts to place children near their home county, it is common for CASAs to travel several hours each way to visit their child. Chad, CASA

for three years, traveled eight hours one way, and stayed overnight in a hotel room to visit the child for whom he advocated. Neither the gas nor the hotel room is reimbursed by the organization, thus the CASAs themselves have to possess the financial resources to travel. Further, because of the time involved, many CASAs are retired. CASAs also have to have time to make multiple phone calls during the day to therapists, doctors, CPS caseworkers, etc., in order to effectively advocate for the children. While CASAs themselves are members of the privileged class and race, the families in foster care are usually not.

Families involved in the foster care system are usually people of color and commonly live below the poverty line. As Trosch (2010) notes, "In 2008, 53% of the children living in foster care were children of color, although children of color make up only 41% of the child population in the United States," according to data from the AFCARS Report (2008). This imbalance of children of color in the foster care system is referred to as (racial) disparity or disproportionality. It is important to note that children of color are no more likely to be victims of neglect or abuse than their white peers; however, children of color comprise 60% of the 500,000 children in the foster care system (Lamon Ashford, 2011).

As Lamon Ashford explains (2011): "According to a report issued by the Government Accountability Office, African-American children across the nation were twice as likely to enter foster care compared with Caucasian children, and remained in foster care 9 months longer" (para. 1). According to the Department of Family Protective Services (DFPS, n.d, para. 1), in Texas "almost 9,000 African-American children are in

substitute care in Texas. This is 29 percent of the children in our state's care, even though African-American children represent only 12 percent of the children in the state.” In Texas specifically, disproportionality swells at each level of the CPS system (DFPS, n.d.).

This means that African-American children: “stay in foster care longer, have more placements while in care, receive fewer services while in care, have lower high school graduation rates, and leave the system less prepared for adulthood than their Caucasian peers” (DFPS, n.d.). DFPS is aware of the problem, and is convening a state-level task force to address the causes of and solutions to disproportionality. There are also twelve “disproportionality specialists” whose duties consist of “engaging community, stakeholders, families and youth, exposing our data and forming a Disproportionality Advisory Committee to address disproportionality within the Child Welfare system in Texas” (DFPS, n.d., para 3). Families of color are disadvantaged in that they do not have access to white privilege and they are disproportionately affected by the CPS system. Families involved in the system are often economically disadvantaged, as well.

Poverty and child neglect are correlated, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2009). A household with an annual income of \$15,000 or less is 22 times as likely to have children who become victims of child abuse or neglect (Sedlak & Broadhurst, 1996). This is not because poor people are more likely to hurt their children; rather poverty in concert with other factors such as unemployment and depression can raise the probability of mistreatment (U.S. Department of Health and

Human Services, 2009). Regardless of race, poor families are more likely to be involved in the CPS system.

Thus, CASAs are a relatively privileged group of people while families in the CPS system are not. However, AFK as an organization and CASAs themselves are aware of this privilege. AFK as an organization is aware of the problem of disproportionality and the issues of racial and class privilege. Kelly, outreach coordinator, screens volunteers to look for awareness of positionality and privilege. She conducts the first interviews to screen volunteers to judge if they would be good candidates to go through training.

Kelly explains:

This lady I interviewed yesterday, she was expressing us a lot of sympathy for “poor little children that this happens to,” but I couldn’t evoke from her empathy for parents, why parents might make poor choices. As a CASA, you’re dealing with parents or moms or dads who have substance abuse issues or mental illness, or maybe they were abused as a kid and you’re evaluating whether or not their kids should go home. It’s important to be able to put yourself in their shoes and see why they may have made the poor choices that they made. Instead of judging and saying “That was dumb, you can’t choose your kids over drugs?” try to understand them a little more. The attitude should be “You’ve got an illness and you’re addicted, you need rehab. And if you can’t be successful at that, then maybe we’ll give you two more chances,” but at least think that ability to just say “Well, if that were me, maybe I would made the same choice too.”

Kelly comments, “We need our volunteers to relate, and have some compassion, some empathy.” CASAs are screened during interviews for their ability to recognize their own positionality and the way that it affects them. CASAs need to be able to put themselves in another person’s shoes in order to advocate for a family. Further, after the volunteers have been selected for training, the trainers continue to screen for people who are uncomfortable raising awareness of their privilege. Kelly tells me,

Usually we can head it off at the pass. Sometimes somebody slips through and they start to be inappropriate in training, maybe with the questions they’re asking or how they’re interacting with others, so you may take them aside and talk to them. I don’t think we’ve ever kicked anybody out of training. What we say is, “We’re going to allow you to finish training if you would like to, but you’re not going to get a case. You won’t be acting as a CASA.”

Trainers also observe volunteers during explicit lectures about privilege, positionality, and disproportionality. After these lectures, trainees are invited to discuss their thoughts, questions, and reactions with the group. The trainers remain aware of who makes which comments and may decide that a trainee should not be a CASA based on their attitude or remarks.

Trainers also gauge the comfort level of the volunteers through activities that explicitly address issues of difference, race, and values. They refer to these as “cultural competence” activities. Kelly confides:

This guy was a retired police officer, pretty conservative, you know. He had real passion for kids but we did this cultural awareness exercise and what you have to

do is to write your answers to the questions then you scrunch up and you throw in a big basket and everybody trades papers and then you have to defend the opinions that are on your sheet. So this guy, after we finished our workshop, he just came up to us and said “Look, I could never work with gay and lesbian foster parents, I think it’s wrong. I don’t think they should raise children. And I just can’t do it. So if I’m going to have to do that, I can’t be a CASA.” He wasn’t apologetic for his beliefs, he just said “I just know I can’t do it,” and so we were really glad he was honest with us.

Kelly shares another story from training:

We had a woman in training who just kind of blurted out these really strange statistics, you know like “Well I saw a study that 80 percent of the children in foster care are white,” while we were talking about disproportionality. And I said “Well that may be what you read, but what we’re talking about is Texas and in Texas, here are the statistics.” So we tried to redirect her that way. Then when we did our cultural diversity exercise, she refused to defend the opinion that was different than hers. She couldn’t do it. She couldn’t put herself in somebody else’s shoes and that’s a big red flag. If you can’t put yourself in somebody else’s shoes, you’re not going to be a good CASA.

Trainers remain vigilant during these activities for people who seem resistant or uncomfortable. Overall, they are looking for a volunteer who is a good fit for the CASA role. Kelly maintains that the CASA program is not made for people who want to bond with children:



We let people know up front, being a CASA isn't warm and fuzzy and eating out and being a mentor. Some foster kids don't even like their CASA. They don't want to talk to them because they aren't saying "Go home." A lot of people call us saying they want to work with kids, and that's not what we are. So we send them to Big Brothers Big Sisters.

This process of screening volunteers seems to be very effective. It occurs multiple times throughout the program and relies upon self-selection as well as practiced observation by the staff. These techniques pay off as the CASAs perform their duties and grow as advocates. One way this is evidenced is by the CASAs learning to perform privilege in order to advocate for their children even though they are not explicitly taught to do so.

**“I’m going to file a lawsuit”: CASAs performing privilege**

CASAs perform privilege to gain resources for the children and families they work with. Roxy has been a CASA for six years. She is currently advocating for a set of siblings; a brother (Donovan) and a sister (Tyra). Roxy is white, and as we sit down to chat she tells me about her plans to travel Europe over the summer. She is advocating for two children who are African-American. One of the siblings, Tyra, has been adopted, and the other is currently living with a relative. Roxy has been in the lives of these children for years, and she has watched them grow up. She relates a story about the importance of keeping track of the children's belongings:

I've also been following up with their belongings. Things are stolen from these children, not just forgotten, not just lost in the masses— things get stolen from them. And it is infuriating. Donovan had a basketball for a week and the

RTC [Residential Treatment Center] said “Sorry it’s gone.” I called up and said “Sorry it’s gone?! You guys better help us come up with one. You have a barrel of them, just pick one.” And they said, “No we’re sorry, he didn’t put his name on it and he’s got to suffer the consequences.” I said, “Listen, if you don’t bring us a basketball, I’m gonna sue. I’m going to file a lawsuit. I’m sick of you guys doing this to these children.” It is just a basketball but it’s a special basketball—and it’s not just that, they’ve stolen a Game Boy, iPod, everything. They [the children] have nothing.

And his suitcase! I bought him a suitcase and the next thing I know he’s traveling with a garbage bag again. I hate that. It was just a cheap little roll along thing. They are so without any possessions. Donovan told me he didn’t want to sue them, he didn’t want to take them to small claims court for 20 bucks. He and I have talked about it over the years, taking things from kids and how that really is kind of [the] bane of my existence, and how next time we’ll do something about it, [and?] he goes, “Okay, let’s do it.” So this time, I’m like, “Okay!” And he said “No, it’s just \$20.” He has nothing and he’s used to having nothing. They finally gave the suitcase back and I immediately put an ID tag and when he was leaving that place called up and made sure that they were going to send him with the suitcase. “Don’t forget, Donovan has some belongings that he should be leaving with.”

Roxy performs her privilege as a white member of the middle-upper class to advocate for Donovan by standing up for him to the people who run RTCs. She offers to

sue the RTC to prove to Donovan that he deserves to have his own possessions, and that the system shouldn't be able to take away his stuff. Further, she tries to teach Donovan that he deserves to stand up for himself and that some people can be trusted. She follows up on his belongings because there is no one else to do it for him, and no one has done it before. Roxy is familiar with the privilege of access to justice, as exemplified by her call to sue the RTC. She tries to share her access to justice with Donovan to not only get his physical possessions back, but to teach him a lesson about justice and fairness. Further, through her relationship with the children, she has gained their trust enough to help them with life skills. Roxy articulates:

I try to expose them to new things, swimming and museums and places they've never been. And I eventually gained their trust enough to help them. When Donovan was 13, he didn't know how to dial a telephone and he was too embarrassed to admit it. He'd never been exposed to the phone. So I try to help with little things they were too embarrassed to let people know.

Roxy is aware of her privilege, and rather than judging Donovan or pitying him, she takes action to help him learn to use the phone. She also uses her own resources to take the children to participate in activities they haven't before, such as visiting museums and going swimming. Roxy actively performs her privilege in order to reallocate resources to the children for whom she advocates. Roxy's privilege is a liability in some situations:

CASA in the community is not well understood. Most people, other foster parents and this adoptive couple are very suspicious of CASA. The adoptive parents

don't quite get it. They don't quite understand me. The children talk about me when I'm not there, which makes them very suspicious. Tyra's adoptive family cut off all communication. She is not allowed to communicate with me now, after all those years and all that we've done, and there's not a thing in the world that anyone can do – she's legally adopted.

And Donovan's grandmother, she's come right out and said that she thinks I work for CPS. She can't fathom that I'm a volunteer. It doesn't compute. When the children first move, either of them anywhere, my contact is frequent. I wanted to make sure they're getting settled, so I go every week. Unfortunately, that translated for Donovan that I was going almost every week because he was always moving. His grandmother asks me a lot of questions like 'Who pays for your gas?' 'Does your husband know you come out here to visit this little boy? What does he think?' She is very suspicious.

In the scenarios described by Roxy, her privilege is a liability when she is interacting with some stakeholders within the system. Specifically, her privilege makes her suspicious to others, especially Donovan's grandmother. She doesn't understand why Roxy would spend her resources—time, money, gas—on Donovan. Roxy's privilege closes some doors and opens others. Diana, CASA for three and a half years, shares that with an older child she worked hard to provide transportation to school: "Instead of going in reading books and playing games I'm trying to find a bicycle for her to go to her track." Chad, a retired professor and CASA for four years, talks about his relationship with Chris, the teenager for whom he advocates:

When I visit he always says, “Stop by and get me a hamburger!” So I do. And I usually try to take him something – he likes art so I have taken him a pad of artist paper and colored pencils. That type of thing. But or – if he shows an interest in books I can get him a book or two.

Chad now lives about three hours away from Chris, and has lived up to eight hours away. He takes the time to drive up and visit with Chris at least once a month, and usually stays overnight in a hotel. Chad is currently advocating for Chris to be allowed to spend a weekend with his grandmother, who lives on the other side of the state. Chad explained:

It’s probably going to be up to me to drive from the town to see his grandmother because his grandmother doesn’t drive. And his grandfather is working out of the area and doesn’t have time to do it. I guess CPS can drive him, but it’s a whole day to get him there and then bring him back at the end of the weekend. I’d probably have to do it at least one way.

Chad’s advocacy involves using his own resources to help reconnect Chris with his family, to bring him snacks, and to encourage Chris to read and draw. Chad acknowledges that Chris has very little, and he uses his authority and power to try to change Chris’ life even in small ways. In another example, Chad describes how he performed privilege in order to help Chris during his transition to foster care:

Chris had developed a fondness for a coach at the high school he went to for about three months. He wanted to be able to call him. So I called the coach and asked him if he’d mind. He said no, he’d be glad to do it. So then I have to go

through CPS. It took a long time to get that permission, but they finally agreed to it. By that time, I think he was too old to want to call him, but I did tell him that he could if he wanted to. I don't know if he ever did or not. But at least he got the impression that I was willing to work for him.

When Chad first contacted CPS about letting Chris speak with his former coach, they were very hesitant. But after Chad persisted in making phone calls and following up with forms, he was able to get permission for them to speak. CASAs have to be persistent to make a difference with cases, and it usually takes a lot of time and energy. Laura, a CASA for a year, illuminates how being a CASA has made her become more persistent: "I had to learn to be more assertive in saying 'No, this is not right' or 'This needs to be done.' I really had to learn when to be assertive, because things need to be done."

Marianne, CASA for two years, agrees: "You constantly ask questions, constantly call people. The CPS workers answer my emails because they know they're going to get another one. If I call and they don't answer, they know their voicemail will be filled with my calls. You have to be persistent." Diana reflects, "On this last case, to get things done I just pestered everyone, I badgered them. I just learned to be annoying. You have to be to get anything done." Roxy depicts CASAs' work similarly: "Kicking and screaming, that's how CASAs really get things done. We just get annoying." Being "annoying" and persistent is a performance of privilege because CASAs have access to the resources to make calls (cell phones and time) and are familiar with the language of bureaucracy. Whiteness is encoded into our institutions, and CASAs are able to take

advantage of their privileged status in order to advocate for the children and families in the CPS system.

Beyond calling, CASAs spend a lot of time visiting with stakeholders in the child's life. Lenny, CASA for two years, confirms:

The children, the parents, the guardians you meet with at least once a month. You probably see the children more like three or four times a month, and the parents a couple times a month. Then, there is a whole panoply of individuals from teachers to school counselors, to therapists, to doctors, you name it, who you're seeing on a quarterly basis. But if things are in flux, you're seeing them more frequently.

As illustrated, CASAs spend a lot of time on their cases. They have to be consistently pushing the system in order to get what they want and need for the children for whom they advocate.

CASAs also perform privilege to advocate for the families, both parents and foster parents. Roxy recounts: "Foster parents don't usually understand our role. So I pulled one foster parent aside and said "Just use me, tell me what you need or what I can do." Lenny tries to set up expectations for a positive relationship with the family immediately: "I start with the parents by laying groundwork them. I start out by saying "Everybody makes mistakes. I've made more than my fair share of mistakes in life. As far as I'm concerned, we start here with trying to figure out how to get you linked back up with your kids.'" An excerpt from fieldnotes also portrays a CASA advocating for the mother of a child in foster care:

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I was sitting in the courtroom before court began, and a CASA sat down next to me. She was talking to the mother of the child for whom she advocates, encouraging her to speak to her lawyer. “He is supposed to help you. Make him explain things to you when you don’t understand. Ask him questions. He is supposed to answer them for you, don’t let him brush you off. This is his job.” The mother was nodding, tentatively. She looked scared and confused. The CASA continued, “So when the judge asks you to speak, remember to mention all the progress you’ve made. And remind the lawyer to ask CPS for more contact. If he forgets, you have the right to remind him. Don’t let him forget. The only way to get what you want is to ask the judge. And if there’s a problem, you can tell me later. But here in court is where everything is decided, so speak up.” The mother continued nodding, and the two abruptly stood up as her lawyer walked in.

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This CASA was coaching the mother to prepare her for court. Along with the other examples, it is clear that CASAs perform privilege to advocate for the parents, foster parents, and children in the CPS system. In the preceding portion, I argued that the CASAs themselves are privileged and the families in the foster care system are not. Second, I demonstrated that CASAs are aware of their privilege, and that they intentionally perform privilege in order to gain resources for the children and families they support.



In this chapter, I introduced the concepts of Imagined Voice, Monitored Voice, and Stifled Voice. I also explored the role of the privilege in the performance of advocacy. In Chapter Four, I will present conclusions and implications of the data.

## CHAPTER IV

### CONCLUSIONS

I designed this project to complicate the conversation about voice in scholarship through close examination of a specific context wherein voice is of utmost importance, and to uncover the ethical issues involved in advocacy. The goal of this project is to create more nuanced conversations about voice and advocacy as well as to give voice to the stories of the children in foster care and the volunteers and staff who dedicate their time, energy, and resources to helping them. In Chapter One, I outlined existing literature relevant to the issues of voice and advocacy and presented the following research questions:

RQ1: How is voice constructed, constrained, and challenged within AFK?

RQ2: How do AFK staff and volunteers practice advocacy?

In Chapter Two, I expounded the field site and explicated the methodology of the study. In Chapter Three, I presented the results of the critical ethnography in two parts relating to each research question. In this chapter, I will lay out the major conclusions and implications that can be drawn from this research, delineate the limitations of the study, and offer suggestions for future research.

#### *Complicating Voice: Conclusions*

The first conclusion drawn from this research is that voice is not always “good,” but rather should be evaluated depending upon the context. This requires a review of the motivation to speak, an examination of the consequences of speaking, and a reflection on the results for the people who are being spoken about. An examination of context

includes an interrogation of the short- and long-term consequences of this expression of voice. Context will guide how these remarks are interpreted in the moment, as well as in the future.

For example, it is not always better for the children in the CPS system to have a voice. For example, if a child is being abused or neglected but still loves his parents, the child's voice needs to be ignored for his own protection. In some cases, then, voice is harmful and can have lasting negative consequences. This extends Dempsey's (2007) study of bounded voice, which argues that limiting voice can have positive benefits in organizations. Dempsey (2007) develops the concept of bounded voice to explain an organizational process which intentionally limits the expression of voice to specific occasions, and argues that this practice is empowering. For example, Dempsey argues that restricting opportunities for voice can protect vulnerable stakeholders from outside scrutiny, can be used as a tactic to manage limited time, and can be practiced as a form of self-censorship by more privileged members to allow historically underprivileged groups to speak.

This research goes even further by revealing that voice can have life-altering negative consequences, and that the suppression of voice is sometimes necessary to protect the best interest of the children in foster care. This is complicated, however, as the foster care system is largely populated by people of color and the advocacy system is characterized by white privilege. It is grating to hear that a child's voice is being taken away for "her own good"; however, this study shows that in some cases that is exactly what happens. This conclusion echoes Clair's work on silence, as she defines silence as

an “expressive activity” that can be transformed into an act of resistance (1998, p. xiv). Therefore, silence is not always a bad thing. Still, as Chad’s story about Joaquin making suicide claims to be moved from RTCs illustrates, children in the foster care system often find ways to manipulate the system in order to obtain some control over their lives.

The devaluing of children’s voices, however, has negative consequences as well. For example, in Roxy’s story about the stolen items, the child is silenced to the degree that he has no control over even his own possessions. Further, as exemplified in the memoirs, many times foster care parents are abusive or neglectful, yet the child has no voice to speak out about the problem. Thus, the suppression of the child’s voice is necessary in court, but in other contexts the children in foster care should not be silenced.

As discussed previously, standpoint feminism theorizes that those in a subordinated position have a specific point of view that differs from the dominant perspective (Hartsock, 1983). Children occupy a subordinate position in the foster care system and as such have a unique perspective, or standpoint. Applying standpoint feminism to the voice of the children in foster care, it becomes essential that those working within the system consider the child’s point of view. This is not to say that the child’s perspective is “more true” or more important than that of the CASA, for example. Rather, the child’s standpoint must be respected as a marginalized standpoint and attended to as such. The application of standpoint feminism to this context reminds scholars that oppression is not limited to identity categories such as race, sex, or class. Children as a group are marginalized in this specific context. Voice is often suppressed

by groups who retain more control in organizations. The irony is that children's voices are suppressed for their own best interest, creating a complex, nuanced context wherein the consequences of giving voice to an oppressed standpoint must be considered.

Further, it can be concluded that the manner of expressing voice must be limited. For example, the children in foster care should be encouraged to express themselves through drawing or journal writing in order to give voice to their concerns. However, as discussed previously, the children should not be able to express themselves in other contexts, such as during court. This extends standpoint feminism to examine the context of voice and the motivations for suppression of voice.

The revelation that the suppression of voice is sometimes necessary is also exemplified by the group FightCPS. Because the parents' voice is stifled by the system, they need another way to be heard. The group serves as an outlet for the stifled voice of the parents; however, its methods and consequences are questionable. The goal of the group is to counter CPS and CASA, not necessarily to be a support for parents.

Second, the study highlights the conclusion that even organizations that value voice control it carefully by stifling and monitoring it. AFK is invested in protecting the unspoken voice of the foster child, yet the CASAs' work is carefully monitored through editing. This process is important to the effective execution of the agency's work, yet in some cases it makes the volunteers feel unsupported. Therefore, it is important to dialogue about issues within the organization as well.

Third, the research reveals that voice does not have to be connected to a physical body or person, as in the imagined voice. Rather, voice can be created to help people

think outside of their own experiences. This, of course, is ethically challenging, but the creation of voice offers insight into the ways in which we can effectively advocate for another person. In feminist and performance studies, there is an emphasis on reclaiming the body and overthrowing the disembodied, masculine voice used in various contexts (Langellier, 1998; Spry 2001). Yet in this study, the Imagined Voice needs to reject a body in order to give life to possibility. CASAs need to abandon their own bodies (and downplay the contemporary bodies of children and parents) and create a voice whose body does not yet exist.

The fourth conclusion that can be drawn about the issue of voice is that voice can be contradicted as it is represented, and that representing another's voice is an ethically fraught situation. For example, during court, Tony, the lawyer for the mother, undermined her voice even as he represented it. CASAs and CPS caseworkers have this power as well. This extends Bakhtin's assertion that a speaker can significantly alter the meaning when reporting another person's words (Bakhtin, 1986). He argues that a speaker may frame a reported utterance in a new manner and change the original meaning in significant ways (Bakhtin, 1981). He warns that a speaker can strategically alter the "dialogizing backdrop" of an utterance to distort its meaning (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 78). The representation of another's voice can easily be manipulated by the use of framing and the altered context. This study reveals that reported speech can be changed not only by verbal differences or framing tactics, but by nonverbal signals such as tone of voice and body language.

*Exploring Advocacy: Conclusions*

By performing privilege, CASAs are reinforcing the structure, or system, that benefits them and disadvantages the families in the foster care system. Yet if these volunteers were not privileged with time, money, and education, they would not be able to volunteer and use their privilege to acquire resources and intervene. Therefore privilege, like gender, can be performed, and has the possibility for a subversive performativity.

Butler's conceptualization of gender as a "stylized repetition" is known as performativity (Butler, 1988). She is the most influential contemporary theorist on performativity (Carlson, 2004). Performativity draws on Foucault, Lacan, and Kristeva to present gender as something that is performed rather than an essence residing inside of a person (Butler, 1990). Performativity posits that the person is "performatively constituted" by specific, repeated acts (Butler, 1993, p. 95).

Performativity is not only used to create gender on the body, but to inscribe class and race as well (Madison & Hamera, 2006). Identity and belonging are performed through the use of language, posture, clothing, gestures, and accent. For example, every time I put on makeup and professional clothing before teaching, I am performatively enacting the identity categories of upper-middle class female. However, because performativity is used to sustain identity categories, there is the possibility of subversive performativities which disrupt the dominant structures of identity (Bhabha, 1994; Madison, 2005). For example, a man who identifies as a man and wears dresses to work

is disrupting the usual performances of gender. Over time, disruptions like these can cause larger change.

By performing privilege in order to help disadvantaged families, CASAs are creating a subversive performance. By performing privilege, the CASAs are reinforcing the structure that benefits them and disadvantages the families in the foster care system. However, if these volunteers were not privileged with time, money, and education, they would not be able to volunteer and use their privilege to acquire resources for the children and families in the CPS system. Thus, their actions can be read as a subversive performance. Subversive performativity “disturbs, disrupts, and disavows hegemonic formations” (Madison & Hamera, 2006, p. xix). Without the performance perspective, it would appear that the volunteers are merely reaffirming the system that privileges them and disadvantages people of color and people with lower income. However, reading privilege as a performance allows us to understand the performance of privilege as a subversive act in this context.

In the context of AFK, the performance of privilege by CASAs sustains the system that oppresses the families of color who are mistreated by the foster care system. Yet CASAs use these performances to reallocate resources from the privileged class to the children and families involved in foster care. Therefore, the performance of privilege in order to redistribute power can be read as a subversive performance. For example, Chad talked about buying books and art supplies with his own resources for the child for whom he advocates. This act redistributes material resources (books, art supplies) that the child would not have access to otherwise. Another key way that the performance of



privilege interrupts the system is through the CASAs talking about the work they do with their friends. Raising awareness about the issues and demonstrating how to take action causes ripples in the system of privilege. These ripples can lead to social change.

The next conclusion is that we can raise awareness of privilege and use it to benefit our community. Consciousness about privilege is often met with guilt (Helms, 1990). Rather than stopping with that powerful emotion, privilege can be used to reallocate resources, thus undermining the system that grants privilege. Privilege can collapse privilege. This opens up the possibilities for understanding the tension Alcoff (1991) describes wherein a privileged individual speaking on behalf of a less-privileged individual can be disempowering rather than empowering. It provides a way to be accountable to privilege, rather than merely complicit in its sustainment. Acknowledging that there can be subversive performances of privilege opens up new avenues for responding to awareness of privilege.

As discussed in Chapter One, Alcoff (1991) proposes four guidelines to consider before speaking on behalf of another person. The first practice is that “the impetus to speak must be carefully analyzed and, in many cases...fought against” (p. 24). Second, Alcoff suggests “we must also interrogate the bearing of our location and context on what it is we are saying, and this should be an explicit part of every serious discursive practice we engage in” (p. 25). Third, she contends that “speaking should always carry with it an accountability and responsibility for what one says” (p. 25). Fourth, Alcoff argues that “in order to evaluate attempts to speak for others in particular instances, we need to analyze the probable or actual effects of the words on the discursive and material

context” (p. 26). CASAs fulfill the goals of the first practice of careful analysis by committing to a long-term relationship with the children for whom they speak. The CASA relationship requires hours of training as well as a long term commitment, which demands careful consideration by the volunteers. CASAs meet the second goal (the awareness of positionality) through training exercises designed to raise awareness about their privilege, belief systems, and childhood experiences. They are taught to probe their own positionality. CASAs meet the third goal because they are accountable to their coordinators directly and the organization as a whole for their advocacy. CASAs engage the fourth practice by focusing on the long-term future of the child through the Imagined Voice. Thus we see that understanding voice, especially the imagined voice, and understanding privilege are important to the practice of speaking for others.

My research extends Alcoff's work because it reveals that advocacy, when bounded by ethical practices, can be subversive and emancipatory. Further, my research suggests another interrogatory practice. Specifically, before you speak for another, you should consider the voices that are uplifted and suppressed currently within that context. Advocates in any field should always carefully consider the issues of voice in context.

#### *Implications for Practice*

After explicating the conclusions about voice and advocacy developed from this project, I will offer practical implications for Advocates For Kids and other nonprofit organizations. The first conclusion presented is that voice is not always “good,” but rather should be evaluated depending upon the context. One example of this is the website FightCPS. The group gives a voice to the birth parents involved in the foster

care system, yet its antagonistic suggestions are detrimental to parents in the system. The parents use agency to express their voice, but it does not benefit them because it creates an antagonistic relationship with the system that is trying to help them get their children back. A practical implication is that the CPS system could create a support group and website for parents going through the system. By offering an institutionalized way for parents to communicate, access information, and receive support, the CPS system would be giving a voice to the parents. The parents would have a place to go within the system to create community and obtain accurate information. They would also be acknowledged as not just “bad parents” but as people who are struggling and want to keep their children. This is how CASAs approach birth parents. CASAs hold birth parents accountable with kindness and compassion, and recognize that many birth parents truly do love their children. This website would send a message that CPS does want families to stay together. The first goal in a CPS case is always reunification, but it is not framed in that way to birth parents. A website would help with that. It would also decrease the need for websites like FightCPS because parents would have another place to go.

AFK volunteers are required to complete in-service learning hours annually, and they are allowed to select which activities to attend. A practical suggestion to highlight the children’s voice could be to invite more former foster children to speak at CASA events or make a video describing their good and bad experiences. Further, AFK hosts a monthly book club where volunteers read a book about some aspect of the foster care system and meet to discuss it. Rather than require a certain number of in-service hours,

continuing education requirements could be arrayed along particular topic areas so that CASAs can devote their time to a variety of issues that will help them advocate.

Another practical implication is that AFK should be more clear about the court report writing and editing process. Specifically, by framing it as a collaborative activity by both the coordinator and volunteer, volunteers would be prepared for the detailed level of feedback they will be receiving. Further, volunteers commented that the examples of court reports used during training were critiqued, but no positive example was discussed. The trainers could implement an example of an “ideal” court report through stages of the editing process, e.g. “First draft by volunteer,” “First edits from coordinator,” and “Final draft.” This would help the volunteers understand what is expected in the court reports.

As demonstrated by the example of the court reports, it is important that expectations for review processes are very clear. Other organizations should be careful to frame collaborative activities as shared endeavors and spell out expectations early on to avoid this type of frustration.

Another practical implication addresses the finding that the volunteers feel that their voice is not important within the organization of AFK. Though AFK solicited surveys for feedback through the help of the board members, volunteers were doubtful that the surveys and the results would be taken seriously. This need for feedback could be addressed in several ways, including: having a former CASA sit on the board specifically as a volunteer representative to communicate with current volunteers; implementing a simple feedback mechanism such as an anonymous suggestion box

located in the front of the office; inviting volunteers to an annual review of the program meeting where board members lead small focus groups in discussions to solicit suggestions for improving the program. Each of these methods should be followed up by a Casa Café devoted to discussing the results of the feedback and how the organization plans to address major issues. This would allow volunteers, staff, and board members to engage in meta-conversations about the direction of the CASA program.

### *Implications for Method*

For this project, the goal of Crystallization served to include multiple voices that were otherwise not attainable by traditional ethnographic procedures due to confidentiality and access. Namely, reading memoirs helped me to understand the foster care system from the perspective of children within the system. Reading memoirs and learning about the frustrations of the foster care system was difficult, as it brought up memories of my own childhood. But the crystallized method allowed me to engage with the emotional toll rather than suppress it or cast it aside as a “distraction” from the research. The complicated emotional terrain of working with CASA became something I used to illuminate the data, rather than something I needed to ignore. Presenting poems based on the stories of the children who grew up in foster care allowed me to include the children’s voice in the study. This is a form of ekphrastic poetry, which is poetry based on art (usually paintings). In this study, I authored poems based on the books in order to better understand what was happening to the children and to express their voice with the same immediacy as the voice of the participants. I began writing poems as an emotional outlet, and then decided to include the poems as part of the dissertation. I was able to

include them easily because I was using a crystallized framework which allows flexibility and encourages creativity.

Further, as part of the project I produced a script and a website to raise awareness with multiple audiences about the issues within the foster care system. Producing these enabled me to see the data from another perspective, specifically the public who is unaffected by the foster care system. Turning this research into meaningful insights for this group was challenging and helped me to understand the importance of the CASA's work for U.S. society. I became accountable not only to my academic colleagues, but to the CASAs, children in foster care, and staff of the organization as I represented their voices in public. Importantly, it was my goal to represent the value of a CASA's work as the national organization's federal funding has been cut by \$15 million.

#### *Limitations*

This study was limited by the selection of interviewees by the organizations. It is possible that there were a limited range of experiences as a CASA that I had access to during formal interviews. Though I observed volunteers being frustrated at the organization, very few would discuss their frustrations during the interviews with me. This could be the result of the volunteer coordinators selecting their "best" volunteers.

Another limitation of the study was my inability to speak directly to the children involved in AFK. I would have liked to include their perspectives on the CASA-foster child relationship and the foster system in general. A third limitation was the small number of hours I was able to spend in court for observations. Court was scheduled on the same day and time I was scheduled to teach, and I was only able to visit twice,

during school holidays. This affected the research because I was not able to observe the CASAs testifying in court more than a few times, so most of my insight was related to interviews and observations during events and around the office. I would like to study this issue again and focus on the interaction in the courtroom as a performance.

### *Suggestions for Further Research*

Future research should examine issues of voice and advocacy in similar situations that are governed by bureaucracy and where a person is empowered to act on behalf of another person, such as in mental health facilities. The ethics of advocacy and the actions of advocates in these roles should be carefully examined using the interrogatory techniques of Alcoff (1991), as well as a careful consideration of the principles of voice. Speaking on behalf of other people who are unable to advocate for themselves might require an Imagined Voice.

Future research could also include investigations of the role of an advocacy organization in shaping and creating the voice of the group for whom it advocates. For example, it would be interesting to examine how a national rape crisis center speaks for the victims of sexual assault, and the consequences that has for the advocacy it performs, as well as for the voice of sexual assault survivors. Various contexts on this topic could be examined such as the court room, legislation, and everyday accounts of sexual assault to reveal which voices are uplifted and which voices are suppressed.

### *Concluding Thoughts*

This chapter presented insights about voice, insights about advocacy, practical implications, implications for crystallization, and limitations and suggestions for future

research. As I complete this project, I am filled with a sense of gratitude for the opportunity to work with the volunteers and staff of AFK, and with the gift of hope for the families involved in the foster care system. The goal of this dissertation was to examine the issues of voice and advocacy and in so doing reveal the complexity of the foster care system. It also offered up inspiring stories about the work of CASAs across this country who spend their time learning what it really means to walk in another person's shoes. The work of a CASA is usually unrecognized, and yet they are vital to our democracy and irreplaceable to the children they represent.



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[Volunteering.htm](#)

APPENDIX A  
INTERVIEW GUIDE

**For Volunteers**

Welcome Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed. As I mentioned, everything you say will be confidential, meaning there will be no names attached to it. Would you like to choose a pseudonym?

- How long have you volunteered with AFK?
- What motivated you to volunteer here?
- What are your basic duties?
- What prepared you for your work with AFK?
- What is the most important part of your work with AFK?
- Why is AFK important?
- What is the most exciting part of your relationship with your child?
- What is the most challenging part of your relationship with your child?
- What is the most challenging part of being an advocate?
- What would you tell a newcomer about volunteering at CASA?
- A lot of CASAs work involves determining and then defending the child's "best interest." How do you know what's in the best interest of the child?
- What do you do when your child's best interest and expressed wishes conflict?
- Is there anything else you'd like to share?

**For Staff**

Welcome Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed. As I mentioned, everything you say will be confidential, meaning there will be no names attached to it. Would you like to choose a pseudonym?

-How long have you worked with AFK?

-Why did you choose to work here?

-What are your basic duties? How many cases do you supervise?

-What prepared you for your work with AFK?

- What is the most important part of your work with AFK?

-Why is AFK important?

-What is the most challenging part of your work?

-What advice would you give a newcomer to AFK?

-A lot of CASAs work involves determining and then defending the child's "best interest." How do you know what's in the best interest of the child?

-What do you do when a child's best interest and expressed wishes conflict?

-Is there anything else you'd like to share?

**For Board**

Welcome Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed. As I mentioned, everything you say will be confidential, meaning there will be no names attached to it. Would you like to choose a pseudonym?

- How long have you volunteered with AFK? How long have you been on the board?
- What motivated you to volunteer here?
- What are your basic duties?
- What prepared you for your work with AFK?
- What is the most important part of your work with AFK?
- Why is AFK important?
- What is the most challenging part of being on the board?
- What would you tell a newcomer about volunteering at CASA?
- Is there anything else you'd like to share?

## APPENDIX B

## SCRIPT

Characters:

- 1) Nicole, Woman, 28, researcher.
- 2) Hanna, poet, representing the child's voice
- 3) Frank-CASA
- 4) Ronald-CASA
- 5) Heidi-CASA
- 6) Six people representing "the system"

Materials: red duct tape, notebook, pen, chairs, scissors, pocket knife.

*Scene One*

Open on stage, Nicole is sitting in the center on the floor surrounded by letters.

The letters are written on different types of paper with different handwriting. She is looking through them one at a time, reading to herself.

She picks one up one at a time and reads one line aloud:

"She poured hot sauce in my mouth and locked me in the cupboard."

"I was the last one to take a bath in the bucket, and one of the six children before me had pooped in it."

"I know my Mom will come back for me. She promised."

"At night, he gets into bed and touches me. He says if I tell anyone no one will ever want to adopt me."

"I lit the fence on fire because I was so angry."

“The drugs make me feel sleepy and weird but the doctor makes me take them.”

“I miss my Daddy, and my brother Juan, and my sister Katie. I haven’t seen them since Christmas three years ago.”

“I am so hungry and Mommy just drinks and cries all day. I wonder what I did wrong.”

Nicole stands up, and stares down at the letters strewn across the ground. She paces, and shakes her head. She is disturbed, angry, and sad. She speaks to the audience. “When I was little, my parents used to forget to pick me up all the time. I’d spend an hour sitting at the dentist’s office, or at school, or at dance class, just waiting for them to remember me. I felt so alone and so unimportant. I felt abandoned. When I think about it now, I still feel that deep sadness.” She looks at the letters. “What about them? There are currently over 500,000 children in foster care in this country. What happened to me was nothing compared to what they go through—abandoned, abused, neglected. And yet I can still reach the pain I felt twenty years ago. Who is standing up for these children? Who is there for them? And what will their future be like?”

Nicole walks off stage.

### *Scene Two*

Nicole has her notebook and walks onto stage. She looks at the audience and says “So, this is what I’ve learned so far. This is the system.”

When she says “system,” six people step forward from backstage. They look at her expectantly.

Nicole reads the roles of each of the key players and moves them around as she does in an attempt to organize them. She is confused at first but trying to make sense of the system.

Nicole points to Person 1, standing in the middle. He steps forward. “So, the first key player in the foster care system is CPS caseworker. He is responsible for responding to allegations of child abuse and neglect, removing the child from the home, and finding a home for the child to live in. So a neighbor or a teacher suspects child abuse and files a report. Within 24 hours of a report, a CPS caseworker must attempt to have face-to-face contact with the child. Within three days, the caseworker must decide if the case is going to move forward. The caseworker looks for several types of abuse/neglect: physical abuse, physical neglect, sexual abuse, medical neglect, neglect of supervision, refusal to accept parental responsibility, and abandonment.

If the child is removed from the home, the caseworker is required to see her at least once a month. CPS caseworkers also testify in court, handle all the paperwork related to the judge-ordered services for a child or parent, places children in homes, and pays foster parents for care of the child. Each case worker has anywhere from 5-15 children to care for at a time.

Nicole brings him over to the side and begins to form a line with him at the beginning. He steps back. Nicole reads: “Next is the Family Court Judge.” “Family Court Judges preside over hearings to decide if a child should be returned to her home, what actions the parents need to take to reform themselves so a child can be returned, or if a child should be placed in foster care or an adoptive home.

The judge reads documents from CPS and CASAs, and hears from each party in court before making a decision. Her responsibility is to uphold the Texas State laws that indicate that a child must either be returned to the home of origin, adopted, or placed in foster care system permanently before the deadline. Judges set measurable goals for parents, caseworkers, and lawyers. For example, a CPS caseworker may request a monthly drug screening for a parent. The judge may decide that because the parent works 8-5 every day, that request would be too burdensome, and rule that the parent complete a drug test every 60 days instead. A judge also rules on the placement of the child and the care of the child while under the supervision of the state. For example, a CASA may request that the child attend therapy twice a week instead of once a month. The judge listens to the CASA's reasons for requesting more therapy, and can rule in support of the request, deny the request, or amend it. “

Nicole places the judge in formation next to the CPS person and the judge steps back. Nicole reads: “The next person is a Lawyer for the birth parent” and another person steps forward.

“The parent's lawyer is required to advocate for the parent's expressed wishes. For example, if a father wants to have weekly phone calls with his child while the child is in foster care, the lawyer will request that the judge make this ruling. Further, if a mother has a history of drug use, but expresses interest in keeping custody of the child, the lawyer must advocate for custody.”

Nicole places the lawyer back in line and reads “Lawyers for the children.



Lawyers for the child or sibling set are required to advocate for the child's expressed wishes. For example, if a boy wants to be reunited with his parents, even if there is a pattern of abuse or neglect, the lawyer is required to advocate for reunification. There is no requirement that the lawyer spend any amount of time with the child."

Nicole places the lawyer in line. She reads "There's also foster parents" and another person steps forward. She reads

"Foster Parent: Foster parents care for children on a temporary basis. Children may be placed in any certified foster care home in the state. Though the state tries to place children near their former home, there is no requirement that they be placed near the parents or in the same school district. As such, children often have to change schools as part of their removal from the home. Foster parents are paid a subsidy for each child in their care. In 2011, the subsidy for child is \$400 a month for a child, and \$540 a month for a child with special needs. Children are not always placed with their siblings."

Nicole places the foster parent in line. She reads: "The last player are the CASAs or Court Appointed Special Advocates." The person steps forward.

"CASAs are volunteers who advocate for the child's best interest. They commit to spending at least a year on a case, and it usually takes longer. They have access to all the files relating to the child and some relating to the child's family. They are authorized to talk to teachers, therapists, case workers, lawyers, parents, family, foster parents, treatment centers, and daycare providers. If there are multiple children in a family, a CASA will generally be an advocate for all of the sisters and brothers.

CASAs perform home visits to assess the state of the home in which the children may be placed. They also meet with the child at least once a month and spend time getting to know her. They build trust with the child, submit court reports and testify to the child's best interest.

This doesn't necessarily mean they advocate for the child's expressed wishes. For example, a child may wish to live with her mother, but if the CASA does not feel that the mother is capable of caring for the child properly, the CASA will not advocate for that outcome.

Further, CASAs perform visitations of prospective adoptive homes to determine if the child is bonded to the family and if the home seems safe for the child. In this way, CASAs work to provide a better future for the child in foster care.

CASAs also advocate for the child's interest in the meantime. This can include building trust by spending time with the child, providing encouragement or advice on behavior issues, and advocating for a child in foster care.

A CASA's role is designed to be temporary. So while they are encouraged to build trust with children to understand their best interests, they are discouraged from pretending to be a permanent fixture in the child's life. For example, CASAs are discouraged from sharing too much of their personal lives with the child. Their role is professional, and requires some detachment so as not to deceive the child."

While Nicole is reading this last paragraph, the CASA walks away from the rest of the "system" line. Nicole walks over to the CASA and reads: "The relationship of all of these people is complicated by the law"

Nicole hands her notebook and pen to the CASA and picks up a large roll of red duct tape. The CASA reads the following section while Nicole uses the red tape to tie the people in the system together in a confusing mess. She puts a small piece tape over the mouth of the “birth parent.” She tapes the rest of the people together in a confusing group.

The CASA reads and walks the stage, looking at notes and at Nicole taping the system together. Nicole also looks at the CASA as though she is getting information about where the tape goes from what the CASA is saying.

“Once a child has been removed from the home, there are four possible outcomes. The first goal is always reunification. In this option, the parent(s) reform the problematic behaviors that caused the child to be removed. For example, a parent may attend parenting classes, discontinue drug use, enter therapy, or move to a new home to provide a safe place for the child to live. The second option is Permanent Managed Care. The third option is relative adoption, and the fourth is non-relative adoption. Permanent adoption is only possible if the rights of the parent(s) have been terminated. This could happen either through the courts, or if the parent(s) voluntarily agree that the child should have another home. If a child is adopted without termination of parental rights, the parents could take the state and new adoptive family to court to get the child back at any time. For this reason, if reunification is not possible, CPS will advocate for termination of parental rights. However, termination of parental rights and permanent adoption means that the state no longer provides a subsidy for care of the child.

For example, if a parent decides to give up a child to a relative (relative adoption), and the care is made permanent, the state will not give the relative a subsidy to help care for the child. Therefore, adoptive parents may be stuck in a difficult situation in which they want to care for a child, but cannot afford to unless the state provides the small stipend. If they accept the temporary placement, the child's parents could sue at any time for custody. Therefore, it is not always in the child's best interest to pursue termination of parental rights, because the child may end up in foster care until she "ages out" at eighteen, even though she is bonded to a relative who wants to adopt."

*Scene Three*

CASA finishes reading and Nicole, CASA, and the system leave the stage stage right. Poet enters Stage left and "wipes" the scene. Nicole stands on the side of stage with her notebook and pen, watching. Poet performs this poem:

Hiding sinking feeling

Covered up sheltered from the storm inside

The yelling doesn't fade, long after I moved out

It followed me here—new bed, new covers, new mom and dad

I grieve for what was, and later, for what wasn't

Happy family car trips complaining about Dad's singing, kisses and cuddles before bed,  
and don't forget your homework sweetheart

How could I be so sad for something I never had

It's like missing the feel of the moon

“System” (except for CASA) comes out and surrounds her in a half circle as she is talking. They wrap the poet in red tape after the poem and sit her down on stage. They place a small piece of tape over her mouth and leave the stage.

Heidi (a CASA) comes out and sits in the chair facing the audience. Nicole is taking notes and listening, standing on the side of the stage. Heidi performs this script:

“I’ve been a CASA for six years. I’m currently advocating for a set of siblings; a brother (Donovan) and a sister (Tyra). I’m white, and advocating for two children who are African American. One of the siblings, Tyra, has been adopted, and the other is currently living with a relative. I’ve been in the lives of these children for years, and watched them grow up. One way I show them that I care is by following up with their belongings. Things are stolen from these children, not just forgotten, not just lost in the masses— things get stolen from them. And it is infuriating.

Donovan had a basketball for a week and the RTC [Residential Treatment Center] said “Sorry it’s gone.” I called up and said “Sorry it’s gone?! You guys better help us come up with one. You have a barrel of them, just pick one.” And they said, “No we’re sorry, he didn’t put his name on it and he’s got to suffer the consequences.” I said, “Listen, if you don’t bring us a basketball, I’m gonna sue. I’m going to file a lawsuit. I’m sick of you guys doing this to these children.” It is just a basketball but it’s a special basketball— and it’s not just that, they’ve stolen a Game Boy, iPod, everything. These children have nothing.

And his suitcase! I bought him a suitcase and the next thing I know he’s traveling with a garbage bag again. I hate that. It was just a cheap little roll along thing. They are

so without any possessions. Donovan told me he didn't want to sue them, he didn't want to take them to small claims court for 20 bucks. He and I have talked about it over the years, taking things from kids and how that really is kind of [the] bane of my existence, and how next time we'll do something about it, [and?] he goes, "Okay, let's do it." So this time, I'm like, "Okay!" And he said "No, it's just \$20." He has nothing and he's used to having nothing. They finally gave the suitcase back and I immediately put an ID tag and when he was leaving that place called up and made sure that they were going to send him with the suitcase. "Don't forget, Donovan has some belongings that he should be leaving with."

Donovan has had four caseworkers and at least seven therapists, he's been on 10 medications, and the information along the way gets really muddled. There was a couple of times where I'd be reading through reports, it's like, wait a minute that didn't happen! Each time he is moved, the caseworker has 14 days to contact the new RTC where Donovan is placed. Which is a really long time. There was one time when I was fed up— She hadn't made contact with anyone and he had been there for eight days! They don't know bipolar disorder runs in his family. They don't know that he's allergic to Lexipro. They didn't know all the medications he was currently on. It's hard enough for him to keep track of all them. It was egregious.

I always get the caseworkers who are jaded because of what they've done and seen or something. I had a birth mom once who was kind of low-functioning, and had a mental illness. And the CPS worker said "Oh, I'm going to give her just enough rope to hang herself." Well that really shouldn't be the attitude. And the Mom isn't doing

anything to hang herself. You don't give a mentally ill, low-functioning Mother rope to hang herself. She's doing her best. She's just not very capable. And for this CPS worker to feel like she's going to sit back and wait for her to fail.

While she talks, she is looking around the stage for something. Toward the end of the talk, she finds scissors and uses them to cut the poet free and removes the tape from her mouth. She helps the poet up and as Heidi finishes, they hold hands together and leave. Nicole listens and observes.

*Scene Four*

Poet enters Stage left and "wipes" the scene. Nicole stands on the side of stage with her notebook and pen, watching. Poet performs this poem:

My friends play Little League, soccer moms in vans after school offer homemade cookies and extra time for TV

I don't want to go home

Home where I don't own anything, not even my clothes

Everything is for sharing, including her punishment

Eight of us share bath water,

Blame and tattle to save ourselves from locked in the cupboard licking hot sauce,  
bleeding

There is no home here, only empty space where home should be

She says it's all my fault

I hate her because I'm scared she's right

“System” (except for CASA) comes out and surrounds her in a half circle as she is talking. They push her and mimic striking her. She falls to the ground crying. They wrap the poet in red tape after the poem and sit her down on stage. They place a small piece of tape over her mouth and leave the stage stage right. Frank (CASA) enters stage left with a pocket knife hidden in his pants or jacket pocket.

Frank sits down and performs this script:

“The children, the parents, the guardians you meet with at least once a month. You probably see the children more like three or four times a month, and the parents a couple times a month. Then, there is a whole panoply of individuals from teachers to school counselors, to therapists, to doctors, you name it, who you’re seeing on a quarterly basis. But if things are in flux, you’re seeing them more frequently.

“I start with the parents by laying groundwork them. I start out by saying “Everybody makes mistakes. I’ve made more than my fair share of mistakes in life. As far as I’m concerned, we start here with trying to figure out how to get you linked back up with your kids.’

Once you finally get your feet on the ground, it is tough maintaining your objectivity. You meet some very unlikable people. And I’m not just saying the parents. There are some wonderful people, but there are some people that it is real easy to dislike. You can’t let your personal prejudice against that individual influence your decision. You’ve got to step back from it and say, ” may personally really dislike this guy. I may think he is a terrible human being. But am I doing that because I personally dislike him or is it because I think he would be detrimental to the children?” You have to step back



and constantly re-evaluate. Is any personal opinion coming into this? Or, are you still objective?

The long term is where we're going to have an impact. I just finished a case working with a child that just turned a year old. Well, the decision we made is going to follow him at least for the next 17 years. And it may in fact, follow him his entire life. So it's an incredible responsibility because this judge very much listens to what the CASAs say. When you make that recommendation, you ought to have a lump in your throat, because no matter how confident you are, you don't know everything. And, you really are playing with people's lives.

Sometimes there is no such thing as a good recommendation. Sometimes you're choosing the best of a bad situation. I mean, the choices that you have, A B & C. They all may be somewhat bad. You're trying to figure out which one is going to be the least harmful. Ideally, you'd love for everybody to have June and Ward Cleaver. Unfortunately, we don't live in 1950s sitcoms. This is the real world and the real world says that sometimes you choose what's the least harmful of the situations involved. And the terrible thing is, and it is what I keep telling people-- if we don't do something about this now, we're going to see these kids again. In a form that we're not going to like. Because when they're 19 or 20 and they've been through the system, and abused by the system, we'll see them again. And they will be doing things that make us say, "Why didn't somebody do something about that?"

As he finishes talking, Frank walks over to the poet and cuts her out of the tape. He brushes her off, helps her up, and pats her on the back and they exit stage right together.

*Scene Five*

Poet enters Stage left and “wipes” the scene. Nicole stands on the side of stage with her notebook and pen, watching. Poet performs this poem:

In the space where laughter should be, there’s silence  
 Aching seething needy fear—no one’s home for you  
 You’ve done something wrong again  
 At least you can cry out loud without getting in trouble  
 You worry they’ll never come back.  
 Hours later they return, your eyes puffy from the pain  
 Hi, how are you dear? We had so much fun today  
 I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry for everything I have ever done, could have ever done  
 Everything you think I did, I’m sorry. Please don’t leave me again. Please.  
 They laugh, and say okay sweetie. Don’t worry.  
 It all happens again tomorrow.

“System” (except for CASA) comes out and surrounds her in a half circle as she is talking.

They wrap the poet in red tape after the poem. They tape her lying down onto the stage. They place a small piece of tape over her mouth and leave the stage stage right.

Ronald performs this script:

“The children in foster care know they’ll be in the system until they’re 18. They don’t get any say in life. Joaquin was 14 when I was assigned to his case. And right away I noticed that he had been in eight different Residential Treatment Centers (RTCs) in two years. Eight. So I started to investigate what was going on, and this is what I found out. Within one to two months of being placed in a RTC, Joaquin told the staff, he wanted to commit suicide. At that point, the RTC is forced to send him immediately to a mental institution, where he spends 2-4 weeks. Then they ship him off to another RTC, and everything starts all over again.

Each time Joaquin goes to a new RTC, they add more psychiatric medications to his prescriptions. He receives a lot of attention, but is never in one place long enough for anyone to really examine him and decide what he should be taking.

I noticed this pattern in his file, and I talked to the CPS case worker about it. She said she was aware of the problem, but didn’t have any time to deal with it. They’re so overwhelmed over there.

So I called several of Joaquin’s psychiatrists who never called back. I eventually talked to a psychiatrist from the RTC and convinced him to cut the medications in half, which was good. “I said ‘This suicide issue, I’m worried something is really wrong.’ The psychiatrist said ‘I can’t help you with that, you need to talk to his therapist about why he’s saying he wants to kill himself so often.’ Then I said ‘Okay well, I’d really like to meet you, can I meet you sometime when you’re going over to the RTC?’ And he said ‘Well I’m going this Saturday but I won’t have time. I’m seeing all the kids.’ There are 79 kids at the RTC. 79. And he was seeing them all in one day.”

“So, really, how much time is he spending with these kids?! I’ve reported that, and maybe something will be done about it, but probably not. Shortly after that Joaquin was switched to another place, and I talked to the therapist right away about this issue.” I said ‘You know, either something is really wrong, or he’s learned to manipulate the system.’ The therapist smiled and said, ‘He won’t get away with that here. When a kid talks about suicide, we put the whole cabin on 24-hour watch. He doesn’t get to change to a new one.’ So about a month ago I talked to his therapist and asked him how Joaquin was doing. The therapist said ‘Joaquin talked to me twice, he said that he was thinking about suicide. And both times I pointed out that we put the cabin on 24-hour watch if he was really thinking about that, and that he wouldn’t be sent away. Both times he smiled and said ‘It’s not worth it then is it.’”

“And this is what I suspected all along, it was just a threat. He just was manipulating the system by doing this. So I think this is what AFK does, tries to work with the therapist and the staff, and tries to find out what their problems are and see if we can’t reach some agreement. We find out what is bothering the kid and try to talk to him about it.”

Nicole stands to the side with a pen and a notebook, observing, listening, and writing.

Ronald pulls the tape off of her mouth, cuts off some of the tape and then hands her the scissors. She cuts herself out and they walk off stage left together.

*Scene Six*

Nicole takes center stage, sets down her notebook and pen. She faces the audience.

“At Advocates For Kids (AFK), victories for a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) are often small, tedious, and hard fought, like those in Chad’s story. Chad was able to get Joaquin’s medications reduced, and stop him from moving all over the state, which meant he didn’t need to change schools every two months.

Chad was able to help Joaquin find some stability, and give him a chance to succeed in high school. Child Protective Services (CPS) is the social service agency that is supposed to fill the role of advocating for the child, but CPS caseworkers are often handling 15-20 cases at a time, and can’t give each child the detailed attention he or she needs.

In 1977, a Seattle judge, exasperated at having to make life-altering decisions for children with little information, founded the CASA program. CASAs are assigned to the “worst” cases, meaning the most complicated or emotionally difficult cases. In 2010, 75,000 people in 49 states volunteered their time to advocate for a child or sibling set in foster care.

I am filled with a sense of gratitude for the opportunity to work with the volunteers and staff of AFK, and with the gift of hope for the families involved in the foster care system. The goal of this was to examine the issues of voice and advocacy and in so doing reveal the complexity of the foster care system, and offer up inspiring stories about the work of CASAs across this country who spend their time learning what it really means to walk in another person’s shoes. The work of a CASA is usually

unrecognized, and yet they are vital to our democracy and irreplaceable to the children they represent. There's a lot of work left to do, so visit the website to find out how you can get involved."

END