South Buffalo grandpa a superhero to kids caught up in family court

By Scott Scanlon | News Refresh Editor

Saturday, May 30, 2015 8:52 AM, updated: May 30, 2015 at 4:02 pm

Bill Diehl Jr. hasn’t been one to sit around in retirement. The former special education teacher is almost 69, and didn’t wait till he retired two years ago to tackle a community need he saw during his working life.

Four years ago, he was trained to become a volunteer with the Court Appointed Special Advocates for Children (CASA) program, which helps kids from broken homes deal with fallout that was no fault of their own.

These are the kids who can become nearly invisible in a legal and social services system that takes kids – at least temporarily – from troubled parents but has become too overwhelmed to deal with dysfunction all too common in Western New York and other U.S. regions.

Diehl and other CASA workers have been trained to help support some of these kids as they and their parents make their way through family court and other court systems. They might be one among a few dozen children handled by a legal aid or social services caseworker.

CASA workers help only one or two of these kids at a time. “Caseworkers with social services, just because of the sheer number of cases they handle, just aren’t able to give the depth or breadth that we can bring,” Diehl said, “so the judges rely on us for feedback on areas that are important to the child.”

Here’s what he wants the rest of us to know about them.
“Despite appearances, sometimes it’s more their circumstances. They’re not bad kids. They’d like to do better. They don’t know how, and they don’t have people showing them. They really come into life with a couple strikes before they get too far down the road. But a lot of them, through CASA support and other supports they get, do turn things around. So it’s not a hopeless situation.

“People just need to step in and be part of the process.”

Diehl donned a Batman outfit last spring for the Superhero Race and Wellness Walk, which benefits the CASA program as well as Compeer Greater Buffalo mental health services.

He isn’t sure he’ll dress as a superhero at 6:30 p.m. Friday, when he and other runners head away from St. George Orthodox Church and onto the Delaware Park Ring Road for this year’s race. (Register for the run/walk at buffalosuperherorace.com or at the church the evening of the race.)

He’s much more confident that his work at CASA makes a difference.

It’s a way to give back, said Diehl, who grew up in South Buffalo and still lives there with his wife, Marilyn. They have four adult children and six grandchildren.

“If you’re blessed with your health when you’re retired, who wants to sit around the house and vegetate? There are still areas to make contributions and get involved with the needs of your fellow citizens,” he said.

Diehl, subject of today’s Healthy Response story in WNY Refresh, has bachelor’s degree in English from Canisius College and a master’s in art from Purdue University. He went back to school for a master’s in special education from SUNY Buffalo State after he started work in the 1970s at the state Developmental Center in West Seneca.

His work life dovetailed nicely into his meaningful volunteer life in retirement.

He talked about a child born without arms or legs who made her way to CASA.

“She was not getting prosthetics or the right kind of help,” he said. “In fact, her prosthetic legs sat in the corner at school and home because they didn’t fit her and nobody knew how to pay for new ones.”

He worked with others to help rectify the challenge.

“Now, she has four working limbs that she uses all the time,” he said. “She’s just made tremendous strides. She’s about to be adopted. Her attorney said that because of what I did for her, he wants me to be at the adoption. These are the kinds of things that happen.”

CASA volunteers also can be important, Diehl said, because judges and lawyers can use help when it comes to intricate special education needs of children.

“It’s a pretty tricky area,” he said, “so they really need people they can rely on to go to special education meetings, to talk to teachers and guidance counselors, and then bring them back feedback and advice.

“We have school psychologists who have retired and become CASA volunteers. We have other teachers. We have nurses who bring to court a lot of medical information that the courts really wouldn’t have otherwise relative to the kids. So anyone who has been in a profession, they really can use your advice. They’re good with legal stuff in the courts, but in areas of expertise where kids really need a lot of attention – medical, education, emotional, counseling – it’s not their specialty.”

Learn more about CASA here. Those interested in volunteering are asked to call Jodi Johnson, director of CASA, through the Erie County Mental Health Association, at 886-1242, Ext. 318 or by email at johnson@eriemha.org.

Diehl has worked with children aged 2 to 18, paying visits, helping them work through challenges and providing insight to others who are making life-altering decisions the these kids.

More than half the children struggle with some sort of mental health-related issue, he said.

“The reason for that is probably not so much that they were born with a mental health issue, but because of the hard life events that they’ve suffered through – the neglect and the abuse and mistreatment,” he said. “They’ve internalized a lot of anger and a lot of frustration, a
dislike for the establishment and often other people. Well over half have dual issues: maybe
education, maybe medical, certainly emotional, as well.”

What are the most important three things Diehl think folks should know about CASA and the
court system?

Number one, I’d say there’s a great need for more people who are in a position to get involved
with CASA and to help these children. There’s many, many cases that go on the back burner for
lack of volunteers to take them on. There’s a tremendous need.

Number two, we do make a dramatic impact in childrens’ lives, in their education
circumstances, their living circumstances.

And doing that would lead to the third thing: There’s a high level of feedback and good feeling
for the people who are willing to donate their time. It’s definitely a two-way street. We take
away a lot from what we’re able to do, too.

dislike for the establishment and often other people. Well over half have dual issues: maybe
education, maybe medical, certainly emotional, as well.”

What are the most important three things Diehl think folks should know about CASA and the
court system?

Number one, I’d say there’s a great need for more people who are in a position to get involved
with CASA and to help these children. There’s many, many cases that go on the back burner for
lack of volunteers to take them on. There’s a tremendous need.

Number two, we do make a dramatic impact in childrens’ lives, in their education
circumstances, their living circumstances.

And doing that would lead to the third thing: There’s a high level of feedback and good feeling
for the people who are willing to donate their time. It’s definitely a two-way street. We take
away a lot from what we’re able to do, too.

email: refresh@buffnews.com

Twitter: @BNrefresh