

GIVING KIDS A CHANCE

BY KATIE MORELL

On a Friday in early May, a 15-year-old Albany High School student named Emari stood on stage at San Francisco's Ritz-Carlton with his mother, Carla Jorden-Swan, in front of a packed ballroom. Sporting a crisp red shirt with black pants, speaking confidently—with punctuations of laughter and pauses to hug his mother—he explained how working with San Francisco CASA had changed his life. When he was done, there was not a dry eye in the house.

Emari's story is one of hardship and, ultimately, triumph. After being born into a violent household, he was placed in foster care at age 2, and cycled through living in group homes and residential situations. By 2011, he had developed violent tendencies and was experiencing educational challenges, and his trust in authority and caregivers was at an all-time low.

With the help of a lawyer, he got on the wait list for SF CASA, a nonprofit that matches everyday citizens with local foster children to be court-appointed special advocates for needs ranging from housing and healthcare to education and emotional support. Later that year, Emari was paired with **Shelley W. Gottlieb**, a former special education teacher, and their relationship began, albeit tentatively on Emari's part.

"He didn't trust me at first, and why should he have?" Gottlieb recalls. "He'd been in one home for six years, then four placements in the two years before I met him. He didn't have any reason to trust me."

Gottlieb began meeting with Emari weekly and the two struck up a friendship. Simultaneously, Jorden-Swan was looking to adopt a child. She'd begun the process and in 2011 was shown a photo of Emari as a candidate for adoption. "His photo was slid across the table," she says. "I looked down at it and asked, 'When can I meet my son?'"

The process for meeting was slow. Gottlieb, with Emari's best interests at heart, was at first skeptical of Jorden-Swan.

"This wasn't a typical adoption where the child is adopted as an infant or toddler," Gottlieb recalls. "He was being adopted at 13 years old and was violent. It was unusual."

Jorden-Swan met Emari in 2012, and his adoption was finalized in 2014. While the last four-plus years have been trying, mother and son have made huge strides, and now Emari is doing incredibly well. Gottlieb is still part of his life, and, while Jorden-Swan no longer serves as Gottlieb's "CASA," he recently

From left to right: Shelley W. Gottlieb, Emari and his mother Carla Jorden-Swan.

asked her to serve in another capacity.

"Six months ago, we went out to lunch and he asked me to be his godmother," she recalls.

Emari's story is a beautiful portrayal of how SF CASA works. Based at 2535 Mission Street, the organization helps about 300 of the 1,000 foster children in San Francisco County. All of these children have been abused or neglected.

The SF branch is one of 900 CASAs throughout the United States. Advocates are asked to commit 10 hours per month for 18 to 24 months to spend with their foster youth.

While the relationship involves creating written court reports every six months that address what is best for the child, it also involves mentoring and spending time with the child.

"Children in San Francisco CASA have been in

foster care for a while or are facing large challenges and need an extra person to help them and be consistent in their lives," says Executive Director **Renee Espinoza**. "In California, foster youth will change schools an average of nine times, change homes seven times and have approximately seven social workers. There is a lot of inconsistency in their lives."

The fact that CASAs are volunteers makes a big difference with child-advocate trust building, she says. People interested in signing up to volunteer can go to weekly information sessions, followed by a 40-hour training before being sworn in as officers of the court. Those who cannot commit the time are encouraged to give monetary support: \$3,500 supports a child with an advocate and staff support for one year; \$1,000 provides educational advocacy training for an advocate; \$100 covers the cost of college applications for a foster youth.

Back at the Ritz-Carlton, Emari and Jorden-Swan smiled brightly as they told their story to the teary crowd. A recent, lengthy road trip bonded the two for the better; Emari told the crowd it was the happiest time of his life. Gottlieb stood to the side of the stage, also beaming.

"It takes a village to raise a child," said Jorden-Swan, "and San Francisco CASA has been an important part of that village for me and Emari."

For more details on SF CASA, visit Sfcasa.org.

