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Cubbage displays compassion for children through CASA role

By ANDREW CRITCHELOW THE NEWS-ENTERPRISE
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Natalie Cubbage of Leitchfield serves as Business Support/Advocate Volunteer Manager for CASA of the Heartland. She has worked with the organization since 2016 and has served as a court-appointed special advocate, Resource Development Coordinator and Interim Executive Director.

Submitted

Getting to Know Natalie Cubbage

Hobbies: Spending time with family and friends, traveling, going to concerts, listening to music, buying records, running, walking her dog.

Pets: An 11-year-old beagle and Jack Russell terrier mix named Bo.

Favorite sports team: The University of Kentucky Wildcats.

Favorite television shows: "The Golden Girls," "Chrisley Knows Best."

Favorite films: "Forrest Gump," "Mrs. Doubtfire."

Favorite music: Classic Rock, metal.

Through her role with CASA of the Heartland, Natalie Cubbage of Leitchfield has made it a full-time mission to help at-risk children in the community.

A 2010 graduate of Grayson County High School, Cubbage earned her bachelor's degree in social work in 2014 from Western Kentucky University. While pursuing her college degree, Cubbage took on an internship with the Woodland Family Resource Center in Radcliff, where she helped develop educational programs for students and families, helped organize a career fair and created informational newsletters for families.

Cubbage also worked with Rudy Garcia and Neil Gibbs to organize a Junior Leadership Corps summer camp and helped develop a team-building curriculum that impacted 300 at-risk children during her internship.

Cubbage said she initially wanted to study nursing but later decided social work was for her. Drawing on her experience teaching children in Sunday School at her church during college, Cubbage

Favorite author: Kristin Hannah.

Favorite food: Chicken tacos.

said she quickly developed a love for working with children.

"I wanted to pursue a degree in a helping profession," she said. "... Throughout my volunteer experiences and role with CASA, I've seen children's lives changed because someone cared."

Before she began working with CASA of the Heartland, Cabbage served as a Volunteer Engagement Coordinator and AmeriCorps VISTA with United Way of Central Kentucky from 2015 to 2016. Through this role, she coordinated volunteer events such as the Day of Action, Project United and Give a Day for Hunger.

Cabbage began working as a court-appointed special advocate for CASA of the Heartland in 2016 and went on to become the organization's Resource Development Coordinator that same year.

CASA of the Heartland trains volunteers to advocate for abused or neglected children who are under the protection of the Hardin County Family Court system. Volunteers build relationships with the children they serve, correspond with their biological or foster families, attend relevant court hearings and make recommendations to the court for children to receive needed services. Volunteers serve as a stable adult figure in their assigned child's life and are asked to continue helping their assigned child until their case is closed.

To become an advocate for CASA of the Heartland, volunteers must complete an application and initial interview, participate in a five-session course that encompasses 30 hours of training, take part in a final interview, get sworn in by a Family Court judge and complete courtroom observation. Training courses are offered multiple times throughout the year.

Cabbage said CASA's mission resonated with her soon after she began volunteering with the organization. She said one moment that particularly resonated with her was during one of her first CASA cases. As soon as she visited her assigned child at their school, the child instantly ran up to her and gave her a hug.

"Some children may understand what CASA is, some may not, but they will remember you were there for them," Cabbage said.

Last year, Cabbage took on the role of Interim Executive Director after former Executive Director Debbie Smith retired in December 2019. Cabbage served as Interim Executive Director from January to August of 2020, providing leadership for the organization until current Executive Director Norma Hatfield took on her role last August.

Cabbage said though it was a challenge to lead the organization amid COVID-19, she said CASA of the Heartland was able to continue its mission in the community in large part due to the

support she received from the organization's board of directors, staff, volunteers and community partners. She said in response to the pandemic, volunteers began working with children through virtual means.

"I learned valuable lessons during my time as Interim Executive Director, one of those lessons being not to be afraid to step outside of your comfort zone," she said.

Cubbage took on her current role as Business Support/Advocate Volunteer Manager earlier this year. Some of her duties include writing grants, reporting data to grantors, managing finances, social media engagement, providing support for CASA volunteers, managing case files and submitting CASA reports to the Hardin County Family Court.

In addition to her role at CASA, Cubbage also serves on the Empty Bowls planning committee with the Grayson County Alliance, regularly participates in charitable walk and run events and is currently working toward earning a master's degree in social work from WKU. In 2016, Cubbage was commissioned as a Kentucky Colonel.

Reflecting on the past five years she spent working with CASA of the Heartland, Cubbage said the most rewarding aspect has been witnessing the difference CASA volunteers make in the lives of area children.

"Because of the involvement of a CASA volunteer, we have seen children be reunified with their parents, placed in a permanent home with relatives or fictive kin, adopted and become successful adults through independent living," she said.

Cubbage said though many in the community may be familiar with CASA of the Heartland's overall mission, she said many may not be familiar with the organization's needs. She said currently, there is a waiting list consisting of 90 at-risk children in need of a CASA volunteer.

"These are our community's children," she said. "I encourage anyone who is looking for a rewarding volunteer experience and wants to make a difference in a child's life to choose CASA. You will receive quality training, be supported by caring and compassionate staff and most importantly, you will help change a child's story."

Those interested in becoming a CASA of the Heartland volunteer can call 270-982-2274 or contact casastaff@casaheartland.org

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