



Allen County Office of  
**GAL/CASA**



# STANDING TALL THROUGH IT ALL

ALLEN COUNTY OFFICE OF  
**GAL/CASA**

2021 VOLUNTEER IMPACT REPORT



# MISSION

The mission of the Allen County Office of GAL/CASA is to advocate for the best interests of children who are involved with the court as victims of child abuse and/or neglect in Allen County and strive to ensure that these children are safe and have a permanent home.

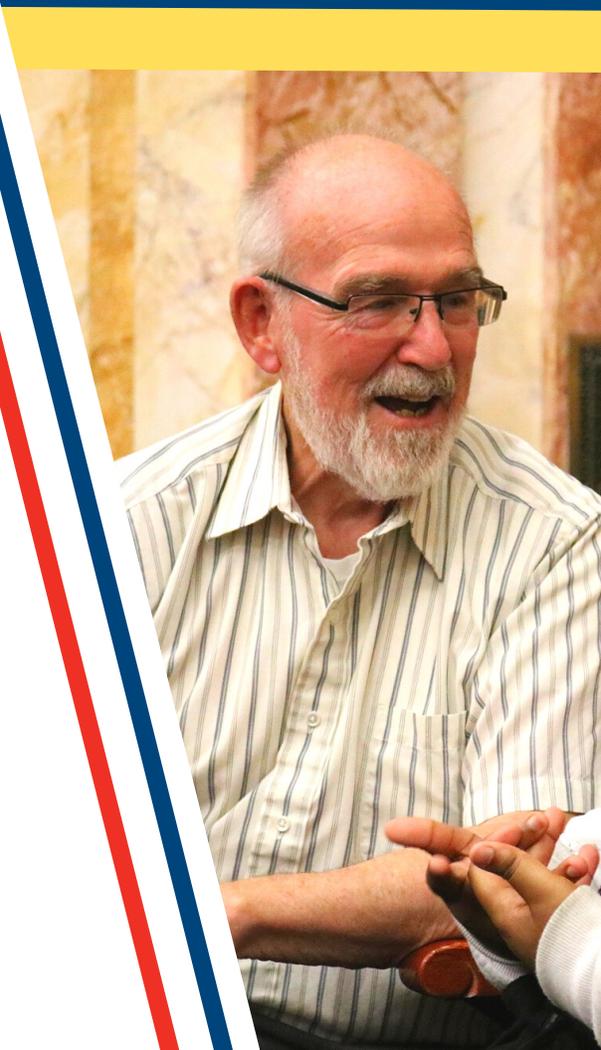
## Allen County CASAs:

In my four years as Director of Allen County CASA, the one thing that stands out above all else is the passionate commitment of our CASA Volunteers. Our **MISSION** is not an easy one to achieve. The issues that families struggle with daily – homelessness, substance abuse, mental illness, domestic violence, and many others – are difficult challenges to overcome. A “safe, permanent home” sometimes seems unlikely if not impossible.

We have recently written a **CORE VALUES** statement to accompany our **MISSION**. You can view our core values on the next page.

These **VALUES** describe **YOU** - caring, committed members of our community – and the work you do advocating for the best interests of children. In 2021, you have given tirelessly of your time and talents to make sure that every child has the best possible outcomes in life. Your work is outlined in this **IMPACT REPORT** and is often what makes a “safe, permanent home” a reality for children in Allen County.

Thank you!  
Nancy Springer





# CORE VALUES

**WE FOCUS ON IMPACT**  
working to ensure that every child receive permanency in a safe, stable, and loving home.

**WE PERSEVERE**  
remaining tenacious and optimistic about outcomes for children and families, making decisions based on the long term, not just today.

**WE VALUE DIFFERENCES**  
seeking people of differing backgrounds and cultures to serve the diverse child welfare system and building connections and partnerships with other social service agencies.

**WE ARE COURAGEOUS**  
boldly acting on convictions and making tough decisions.



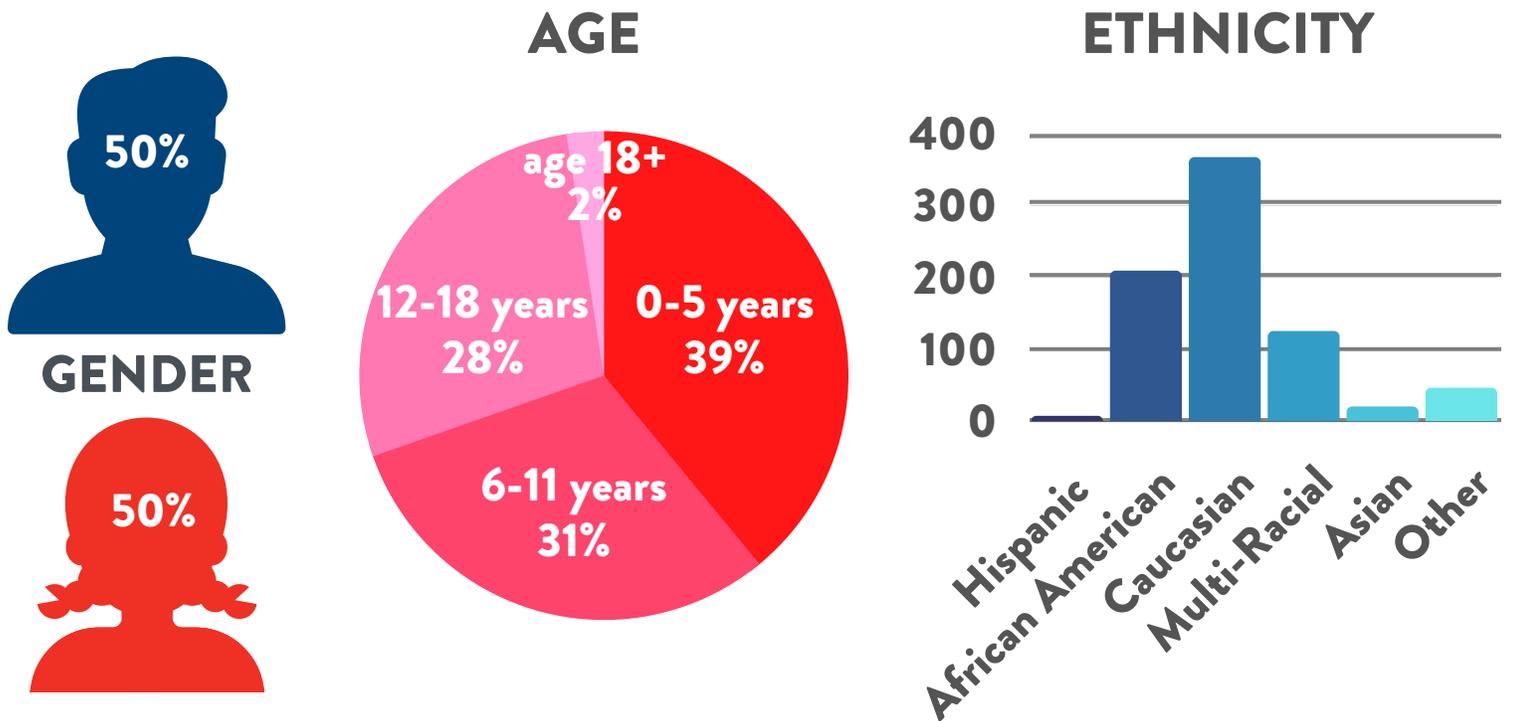
# 2021 BY THE NUMBERS



## Permanency Achieved for 452 Children



# CHILD DEMOGRAPHICS



## COURTNEY, ULISES AND CARTER UNRUE



CASA Volunteer Courtney Unrue and her husband Kurt certainly never expected to have trouble starting a family. However, through this unfortunate situation they learned to stand tall, through it all. Courtney and Kurt became foster parents.

A few weeks later, they received a placement call for a three-year-old boy. Right away, they said, "Yes."

When the caseworker arrived, Courtney recalls watching her cross the street holding the hand of the cutest little boy she had ever seen. Courtney expressed, "I knew he was going to be a very special part of our lives."

supportive and listened to what Courtney and Kurt felt was best for their foster child. "It was so comforting knowing that there was someone on their team, rooting for them!" Courtney said.

Even though both boys' permanency plans were reunification in the beginning, both cases, parental rights were terminated. Courtney and Kurt were able to adopt Carter Unrue in November 2019 and Ulises Unrue in July 2021. Their CASAs championed for them until their adoptions finalized.

After Uli, as they call him, was adopted, Courtney and Kurt closed their foster license. "I knew I wasn't done helping kids and families," Courtney confessed. She did go back and forth on what to do next, but ultimately landed on becoming a CASA Volunteer in Allen County.

Courtney reflected on why she became a CASA: "The fact that my kids can watch me and know that I am helping other kids who are in situations similar to theirs is what makes this work as a CASA all the more important. Over the past six and a half years of this type of work, I learned that we should never stop advocating for the child(ren) in our care. Our voice is powerful and can make a world of difference in the lives of others and even in our own lives."

**"It was so comforting knowing that there was someone on their team, rooting for them!"**

Courtney and Kurt were blessed with a strong support system and knew that foster care was their best option for bringing children into their home. Courtney's best friend and her husband had begun their foster care journey a few years before and Kurt's parents had been foster parents for several years while he was growing up.

Their first placement were two sisters who joined the Unrue family for six weeks. What a crash course in parenting it was for Courtney and Kurt! After the girls left, they needed some time to recoup. Foster parenting is emotionally taxing. Many foster parents step away after their first placement, but Courtney and Kurt had a mission to help care for kids.

A year later, they welcomed another little 4-year-old boy. Kurt picked him up from the Department of Child services and instantly introduced him to the entire family at a birthday party. Even then, everyone knew that there was something special about this bright-eyed, shy boy.

During the time both boys were in foster care with the Unrue's, they had the opportunity to work with two Court Appointed Special Advocates. While Courtney and Kurt only met with them a few times, the CASAs were very responsive to emails and phone calls. In court, they were

# RIISING TO THE OCCASION

# A STEADY SUPPORT

If you ask Gabe to reflect on his life in the child welfare system he will be the first to tell you that once you lose your remote, it is hard to change the channel. However, once Gabe found his life remote among the crumbs and dirt, he learned to stand tall, through it all.

Gabe and his three siblings were removed from their mother's care when he was eight years old. After series of bad boyfriends, one in particular who was physically abusive, Gabe and his siblings found themselves in different foster homes.

Being the oldest child, Gabe always felt like the protector. When asked what happened the day he was removed, Gabe did the best he could to articulate the abuse they had all endured - welts, bruises and an imprint of a horse from a belt buckle. Even though they were now safe, Gabe struggled with finding a loving home.

He expressed that within the first week after his removal, "my foster parents had me crawl on my hands and knees until I got rug burns for misbehaving." However, once he transitioned to another home he found many caring and thoughtful foster parents, two of them in particular he still keeps in contact with to this day.

Throughout his time in the child welfare system, he did not know what a Court Appointed Special Advocate was - until he was 16. CASA Volunteer Mike Payne walked into Gabe's life when he needed it the most. Knowing that adulthood was in the distance, Mike provided not only someone to lean on but also someone to fight for Gabe in court. "Mike has always been super helpful with giving me advice and resources," Gabe explained.

whether it be bad or good, you can use it to make better choices for yourself and for your family in the future. I want to give my kids and future wife a better life than I ever had while I was growing up. Right now, in this moment and every day after today, I think about where I came from and how I did not let the bad things that happened in my past dictate where I would end up as an adult. I'm 20 years old and I'm loving life. So in summary, yes life sucks and

**"Sometimes you'll lose your remote to life and miss the best part, but that remote is never gone and once you find it again you can switch channels and see what else life has in store for you."**

Now, Gabe looks to the future as an adult who is benefiting from the Collaborative Care program provided by the Department of Child Services. Gabe had the choice to have his CASA worker continue to advocate for him until the age of 22. Mike is still hanging in there with him and supporting Gabe along the way.

When asked what his biggest take away is from his experience in the child welfare system, transitioning to collaborative care and navigating adulthood he expressed, "No matter what your experience is in the past,

sometimes you'll lose your remote to life and miss the best part, but that remote is never gone and once you find it again you can switch channels and see what else life has in store for you."

Gabe currently works at Amazon, and was recently honorably discharged from the military. He has many goals for the future, but chiefly he states, "I want to have a house by 26, a van, a beautiful wife and a group of kids in the back asking me to get McDonald's in the middle of driving down a highway."



**GABE, FORMER FOSTER CHILD**

## DONNA NEFF, CASA VOLUNTEER FOR 25 YEARS



**Adapt, adjust, pivot.** Since 1997, Donna Neff has done just that. When everything in our world changes, it is what you do to survive. Donna has served as a Court Appointed Special Advocate for 25 years. She has seen countless changes to the child welfare system and even experienced child advocacy through the lens of a global pandemic. But, what motivated her back in 1997 to take on this challenging work as a CASA, we took a moment to find out.

**Q. You have been a CASA for 25 years! Why did you want to become a CASA?**

A. When asked why I am involved in CASA I normally just say because I love kids. Although that is true, I have a deep desire to protect children.

**Q. Do you have any personal experiences or know someone who has, that may have spurred your desire to advocate for children?**

A. My father was killed in a farming accident right after he came home from WWII, leaving my mother a single parent. I was very vulnerable for every pervert that came along, from an adult cousin, to a firefighter whom I babysat for, to my Mom's boyfriend. Thank God I was never raped but the things I went through as a child with no advocate left a deep impression on me that has lasted forever.

**Q. A lot has changed in 25 years with regards to child advocacy. What have been the most frustrating and successful parts of your work?**

A. The most frustrating part was spending hours of research, talking to and caring for the children, then go to court and have a judicial officer send the kids back to their parent when I felt strongly that they should not be reunified...

However, the highlight of my work is to see children go back home and we never get called again on the same case. They aren't all winners or go back to the greatest of conditions but they are reunited with their family and DCS or CASA or even the police have never been called back again.

**Q. We recently had to navigate our advocacy through a pandemic. How did the pandemic impact the children you serve?**

A. Previously, when we were first hit, I did Zoom with my child and talked to her over the phone; that case was closed during the pandemic. My next case in the middle of it, I ended up getting COVID and bronchitis even though I had had all three shots and was too sick for seven weeks to go see my child. After I started feeling better, I talked to her on the phone and checked in with her foster parent and her school. When I was finally able to visit with her, she came running and gave me a big hug.

**Q. What words of wisdom do you have for CASA volunteers who are just now getting their first cases?**

A. Be diligent and dig deep in the case. Listening is probably the most important attribute you can have. Encouragement goes a long-ways for these children, too, but don't make promises. Each case is different, and the amazing thing is no matter how dire the conditions in the home, the children want to go back to their parent(s).

Over the last 25 years Donna has served 12 cases and 24 children.

# 2021 CASA VOLUNTEERS

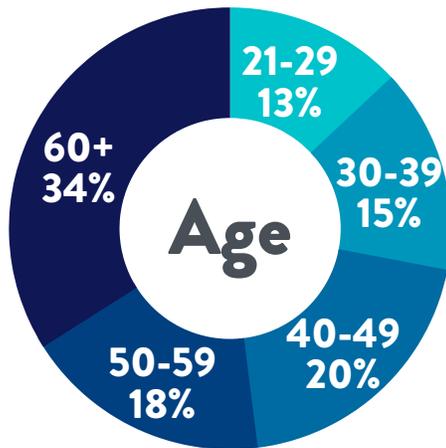


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**Gender**

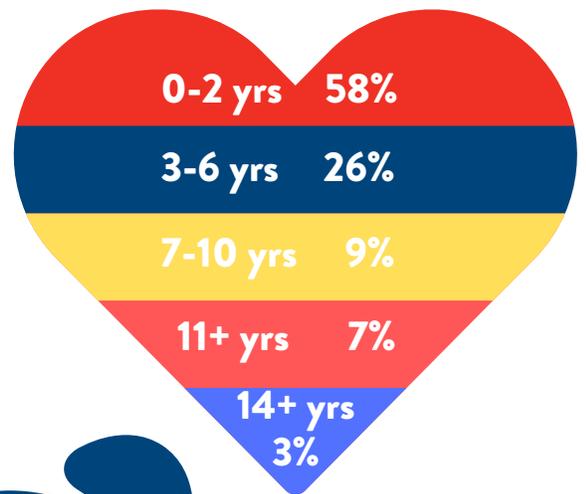


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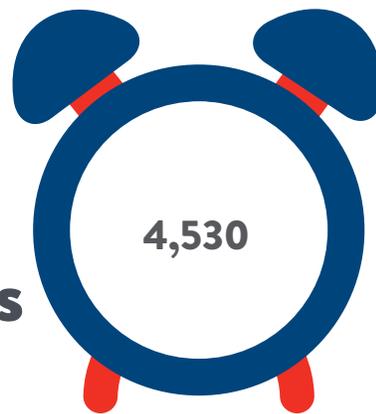


**Age**

## Years of Service



**Contact Hours by Volunteers**



4,530



Shamika Alford  
 Holli Anderson  
 Nicole Arivett  
 Travis Arivett  
 Michelle Ashcraft  
 Hydeia Ayers  
 Rebecca Barrand  
 Flora Barron  
 Jennifer Basak-Wilson  
 Mary Bell  
 Bob Blanton ★★  
 Natalie Bojrab  
 Larry Braden  
 Mary Bradshaw  
 Mary Brown  
 Payton Buehrer  
 Quinita Coffey  
 Christina Collins  
 Erika Combs  
 Peter Conde  
 Gina Connelly ★  
 Kayla Curtin  
 David Dalrymple  
 Collin Delagrang  
 Matthew Densel ★  
 Carmen Dillon ★★  
 Anh Dinh  
 Lynn Douple ★★ ★  
 Jacob Duke  
 Cheryl Dunn  
 Rosemary Easterday ★★  
 Stephanie Eastom ★  
 Tylisa Edwards  
 Peggy Eschenbacher ★★  
 Annemaria Farrell  
 Andrea Fast

Legna Figueroa  
 Devan Filchak  
 Stephanie Fitzharris  
 Linda Flatley  
 Harriet Follis  
 Janel Force  
 Stacey Forman Hilsmier  
 Michele Fortune  
 Jen Foster  
 Amber Frame  
 Emily Franks  
 Kathleen Gentry  
 Geoff Gephart  
 Jessica Gerardot ★  
 Grace German  
 Brian Gibbons  
 Julie Goodman  
 Anthony Gray  
 Tara Grier  
 Victoria Grose  
 Zoe Grosenbacher  
 Scott Habben ★  
 Janet Haigh  
 Christopher Hambrock  
 Amanda Hampton  
 Jeanne Handford ★★  
 Victoria Hansel  
 Sandra Harber ★  
 Ashleigh Hardin  
 Victoria Harrison  
 Connie Hazelrigg  
 Sandra Hershmann ★  
 Amanda Hite  
 Brooke Hoffman  
 Sandra Hon  
 Michael Horton

Donell Housel  
 Marla Housel  
 Andrea Hudson ★★  
 Dominique Hyndman  
 Dawn Jones ★  
 Kathleen Kearns  
 Jessica Keathley  
 Elizabeth Keen  
 Nichole Kendregan  
 Jillienne Kenner  
 Bonnie Kerekgyarto  
 Linda Kerr  
 Elizabeth Kreider  
 Patti Kring  
 Malea Kruse  
 Dawn Kuhlman  
 Tearra Lapsley  
 Shelby Lasley  
 Pamela Leeper ★  
 Shanna Liechty  
 Darlene Lloyd  
 Heloise Maconochie ★  
 Deanna Mains  
 Jane Martin  
 John Martin ★★  
 Karen Martin-Coleman  
 Karen Martz  
 Anita Mather ★★  
 Erin McBride  
 Jill McBride  
 Timothy McKenzie  
 Nicholas Meharg  
 Mary Melcher ★★  
 Pallavi Merchant  
 Meagan Milne ★★  
 Aimee Morningstar

Danita Morris ★★  
 Dorte Moses ★★  
 Krista Mounsey  
 Rosemary Mouzon  
 Wendy Moyle ★★  
 Ginger Myers  
 Michelle Myers  
 Donna Neff ★★ ★★  
 Gayle Newton ★★  
 Jennifer Norris-Hale  
 Anna Outten  
 Staci Overbeck  
 Cameo Parry  
 Carol Patterson ★  
 Michael Payne ★  
 Angela Peoples  
 David Pepler ★  
 Karen Petersen  
 Joan Phillips ★  
 Katherine Phillips  
 Laura Platt  
 Teresa Pohler ★★  
 Elaine Pontillo  
 Michelle Potts  
 Jan Rainey  
 Lael Ramer  
 Michelle Ramos Gray  
 Laura Rao ★  
 Dani Rice  
 Brenda Rietdorf  
 Stacy Roberts ★  
 Christopher Rollins  
 Denise Roudebush  
 Margaret Roussey ★  
 Lucas Rumpel  
 Holly Schaubert

Theresa Sell ★  
 Karen Shadle ★  
 Kelly Shank  
 Jessica Shaw  
 Erica Short  
 Henry Sierk ★  
 Kara Skaggs  
 Keston Smith ★  
 Zoey Smith  
 Karin Soat  
 Coretta Staten  
 Gary Stetler ★  
 Sonia Strevy ★  
 Marilee Stroud  
 Christina Sutter ★★  
 Linda Thieme  
 Sarah Thompson  
 Amber Toole  
 Marilyn Toro  
 Maureen Trentadue  
 Roxanne Tuesley ★  
 Jeana Twitchell  
 Debra Ulmer-Kolkman  
 Courtney Unrue  
 Arlena Vanhoy  
 Rebecca Weingartner ★  
 Rachel Wemhoff  
 Nancy Wemuth ★  
 Laura Wheeler  
 Paula Wiegerink  
 Debra Wills ★  
 Cynthia Winn  
 Kisha Woodward  
 Jean Wyss

★ Celebrating 5+ years of service with CASA

★★ Celebrating 10+ years of service with CASA

★★★ Celebrating 15+ years of service with CASA



# CITIZENS ADVISORY BOARD

The Citizens Advisory Board is a group of community volunteers who assist the court and CASA Program in developing and revising policies and procedures to ensure the highest quality of advocacy for abused and neglected children in Allen County.

Suzan Rutz      Amy Dahm Just      Jo'Netta Neeley      Keston Smith  
Chris Dunn      Melissa Hayden      Gayle Newton      Stacey Speith

# ALLEN COUNTY CASA COALITION

The Allen County CASA Coalition is a 501(c)3 nonprofit that is governed by a volunteer board of directors with diverse experience and skills. The Coalition raises funds to recruit, train, and support our volunteers.

John Ocken      John Brita      Ann Escosa Griffin      Lori Stinson  
Scott Bradtmiller      Nick Ciocca      Anita Mather

## GAYLE NEWTON, CASA VOLUNTEER & CITIZEN ADVISORY BOARD MEMBER



Gayle Newton has been a Court Appointed Special Advocate since 2008. She followed her intuition after seeing a billboard about becoming a CASA Volunteer. To further her advocacy for children who experience abuse and/or neglect, Gayle joined the Allen County Office of GAL/CASA Community Advisory board in 2017. Every day, Gayle stands tall and fights for the rights of children in her community.

Growing up, Gayle experienced childhood trauma. She knew then that she wanted to make sure that no children were going to be left behind without a voice. As part of the Citizen Advisory Board, Gayle reviews policies and procedures, solves problems, and provides insight into how CASA can better serve children who are abused and/or neglected.

Reflecting on her 14 years of advocacy work, Gayle cheered, "The best parts are when the case is closed and the child has progressed mentally and socially. The child has been placed in the best possible environment, whether it is back with family or with new family, and they are safe." When asked what advice she would give to prospective volunteers, she encouraged, "Listen to your heart, be available and believe that children are worthy of protection."

# ALLEN SUPERIOR COURT FAMILY RELATIONS DIVISION



Judge Lori K. Morgan



Magistrate Sherry Hartzler



Magistrate Beth A. Webber

# ALLEN COUNTY OFFICE OF GAL/CASA



Nancy Springer  
Director



Suzanne Lange  
Assistant Director



Brooke Neuhaus  
CASA Supervisor



Nicole Fischer  
CASA Supervisor



Aaron Rieidenbach  
CASA Supervisor



Chris Hamilton  
CASA Attorney



Mell Depew  
Training & Recruitment



Laura Goodwin  
Office Manager



Michael Howell  
CASA Supervisor



Roxanne Tuesley  
Child Visitation Specialist



Christina Sutter  
Program Assistant



Karen Coleman  
Child Visitation Specialist



**Allen County Office of GAL/CASA**  
**1 East Main Street, Suite 421**  
**Fort Wayne, IN 46802**

**"If we don't stand up  
for children, then we  
don't stand for much"**

**-Marian Wright Edelman**

