

# Volunteer program focuses on children

By Jen Osborn  
Staff writer

Anna McPhatter doesn't have children of her own but she's always taken a personal interest in the lives of the children in and around her community.

That's why for the past three years, McPhatter has given hours upon hours of her own time to advocate for children in Hoke and Scotland counties as a volunteer with the guardian ad litem program, a program in which an adult acts as a child's voice in court.

McPhatter said being a volunteer has been fulfilling because she can give children the best of her abilities and attention.

"I guess guardian ad litem has filled kind of a void in me because it's allowed me to share a love nothing else has," McPhatter said.

Children, she said, are the most precious gifts and people should do everything in their power to make sure they have the opportunity to grow up in a productive, loving environment. McPhatter said it upsets her to hear of a child who has been abused or neglected.

"I think it should not only bother me, but it should bother every citizen," McPhatter said. If people know of abuse and don't report it, they are just as guilty as the person causing the abuse, she said.

## Getting involved

McPhatter has been working as a volunteer with the guardian ad litem program for more than three years.

"One of my co-workers told me about it because I do a lot of work with youth and she thought it would be something I'd enjoy," McPhatter said.

So, she said, she filled out an application and was accepted to go through the 20-hour training program required to be a court-appointed guardian. In the application period, there is a criminal background check as well as a personal history listing of work with children.

One reason applicants must write a paragraph describing their interest in the program is to avoid people who may have ulterior motives.

"You have to be worthy, really, to work with a program like this," McPhatter said.

In her time as a volunteer, McPhatter said it's been enriching work, although sometimes difficult.

"I've had cases that were very heart-breaking because you go in as an objective person but when it comes to a child, it's easy to become emotionally attached," McPhatter said.

However, she said, the good times outweigh the bad.

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gives me a chance to look at the way our children are being handled through the system," McPhatter said. "I was pleased. It (the volunteer program) answered a lot of questions about the judicial system."

Fortunately, she said, all the cases she's been involved with have been successful and the children have been returned to their homes. Although the guardian ad litem program works with the department of social services to protect children from abuse and neglect from their families, its intent is to find solution to problems, said Jean Miller, district administrator of the guardian ad litem program. She explained foster care is meant to be a short-term solution until problems are corrected.

"My role is to advocate for the child," McPhatter said. "I like to keep the family union because that's what we're all about."

## Time-consuming work

Being a volunteer in the guardian ad litem program can take as little or as much time as the individual person is willing to put forth, according to Miller. Sometimes, she said, it does take a large time commitment because certain cases, like sexual abuse allegations, are very complicated.

"You want to make sure you've studied the case, interviewed all parties," McPhatter explained. "You want to make sure you spend quality time."

And even if a lot of time and effort is put forth, McPhatter said she still often feels she could have prepared better for whatever the judge may ask.

"It's through your eyes he's going to see what's best for this child," Miller said.

## Call for help

The guardian ad litem process begins when abuse is reported to the authorities or the department of social services, Miller said.

"Once a petition is filed alleging abuse or neglect the program is automatically appointed," Miller said.

Miller said she usually tries to match cases with a volunteer's individual experience and the caseload he or she is able to handle. After the judge's appointment, Miller said, an investigation begins. Volunteers have

court authority to interview anybody that may have contact with the family. The information they obtain, Miller said, is highly confidential. That's one reason volunteers must go through such a strict process before they're accepted into the program.

After an investigation, the volunteer usually organizes the collected material and discusses the case with Miller. Then, a report is submitted to the judge.

"I try to emphasize to people that we're that child's voice in court," Miller said in explaining volunteer's duties.

She said guardians are specifically appointed in cases of juvenile court. However, the judge may also allow them to accompany a child and be their advocate during criminal court proceedings.

Once the judge makes a ruling, the volunteer and the child don't part ways. Miller explained that the volunteer is responsible for monitoring foster care placement and continuing to seek permanent solutions to the problem.

"Once a volunteer is assigned a case, they're involved in that case for the course of its life in the court system," Miller said.

There are only 10 guardian volunteers in Hoke County, Miller said, each of whom put forth tremendous time and effort. The majority of the volunteers she monitors have full-time jobs.


"That says a lot about this county," Miller said, explaining that the volunteers have families, lives and jobs, yet still find time to help.

Yet, although she's proud of the caliber of the volunteers here, Miller said the county is always in need of more help.

She said anyone interested in working with the guardian ad litem program or hearing more about it may call her Laurinburg office at 277-3210.

Working on the front lines herself, McPhatter agrees that more volunteers are desperately needed.

"It's a worthwhile agency and everybody not involved needs to be involved," McPhatter said, reminding the public to be aware of how their own and their neighbor's children are being treated. "You are your child's keeper."



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*District Attorney*



**Education:**

- Graduate of Clinton High School
- UNC at Chapel Hill (AB)
- UNC at Chapel Hill Law School (JD)
- University of Houston - (Career Prosecutor School)
- Institute of Government - (Effective Management School)

**Professional Experience:**

- 21 years as an attorney/18 years as a prosecutor
- First Female District Attorney in North Carolina
- District Attorney - Scotland, Hoke & Cumberland Counties (1989-present)
- Assistant District Attorney - Hoke & Cumberland Counties (1978-88)
- Former Treasurer, NC District Attorney's Association
- Private Practice, Clinton, NC (1976-78)
- Vista Volunteer, Staff Attorney, Alaska Legal Services Corps. (1975-76)


**Civic Service:**

- Raeford/Presbyterian Church - Elder, Choir, Youth Advisor
- Scotland/Hoke Criminal Justice Partnership Act Task Force
- Chairman, Crime & Public Safety Committee - Hoke Strategic Planning
- Scottish Pilot Club, Laurinburg
- Criminal Justice Advisory Board, Richmond Community College
- Board of Visitors, St. Andrews College, Laurinburg
- State Employees' Credit Union Advisory Board, Raeford
- Raeford/Hoke Chamber of Commerce, Treasurer 1990-92
- Hoke Family Medical Center, Board of Directors, Acting Chairman
- Scotland/Hoke Community Penalties Board
- Child Protection & Fatality Teams, Hoke & Scotland
- Boy Scouts of America, Cape Fear Council Executive Board
- 1st Hoke Leadership Class (Project: D.A.R.E. Program)

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The Hoke County Commissioners should trust the voters of Hoke County to decide, in a referendum, whether or not the sale of mixed beverages will be allowed in Hoke County. If elected, I will vote to hold that referendum.

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