

# Mom-daughter survive depths of despair with CASA's help

By Kathryn Reed

Stubbornness is what Sonja Burns call it.

Tenacity, love – those are other words that could be used to describe the fight she and her mom put toward ensuring they would be reunited.

Between 2006 and 2008 Sonja was part of the Court Appointed Special Advocates program in South Lake Tahoe. She lived with a foster family while her mom, Katrina Burns, straightened her life out so an El Dorado County judge would award her custody of her now 16-year-old daughter.



Katrina and Sonja Burns fought to be a united family.  
Photo/Kathryn Reed

Katrina has been clean for more than three years. She has been off cigarettes for nearly two weeks.

“Not every family ends up on the other end together. They were strong,” Kelly Parker, site manager-senior case supervisor for CASA El Dorado, said of the Burns.

Sonja Burns, a sophomore at South Tahoe High School, will be the keynote speaker at the May 1 Evening of Opulence fundraiser for CASA. She's not nervous to tell her story to the more than 100 people who are expected to attend the event at Marcus Ashley Gallery.

The rocky times for mother and daughter seem to be in the past. Now it's just the normal teen-mom battles.

CASA provided both Burns an outlet that hadn't been there before. The caseworker, Linda, is considered by both to be a member of the family.

"I know how closed up my daughter was and can be. If there was a chance she could open up to somebody, I (wanted her to)," Katrina Burns said. Another female adult in her daughter's life didn't threaten her. She wanted her daughter to have the support she needed.

CASA is designed to provide a child with an advocate in court. That person can speak for the youth in court if they don't want to speak for themselves. A CASA is also a friend – someone to go to the movies with, have lunch with and share with.

The South Lake Tahoe office has been open since 1994, with the Placerville office opening two years earlier. The money raised next weekend benefits the entire county.

"Our program has consistently grown every year. With a rise in substance abuse, there will be a rise in child abuse and neglect," Parker said.

The lousy economy is taking its toll on families. Despite less money in households, she said cash for alcohol does not seem to be a problem.

From August 2008 to August 2009 more than 400 children in El Dorado County were served by CASA. The numbers indicate 500

will be part of CASA from August 2009 to August 2010.

It took some time before Sonja opened up to her CASA worker. Politeness was always there. But conversations centered on the basics, with no real depth to them.

In the end, having someone to talk to was a key benefit of CASA, according to Sonja.

“I couldn’t tell my friends how I was feeling. I thought showing sadness was a weakness,” Sonja said.

It was a struggle for Katrina and Sonja to be allowed to live under the same roof.

“The first court papers they handed me they were putting her up for adoption,” Katrina said. This is often the case when Child Protective Services has been involved with a family.

Sonja doesn’t think that would have happened. She thinks a group home is where she would have ended up.

But the determination of mother and daughter, and with the CASA worker’s help, the two are under the same roof.

For more information about CASA, [click here](#). Call Kelly Parker at (530) 573.3072 for tickets – they are \$75 – to the May 1 Evening of Opulence.