Welcome back. This is Jen Lee, the creator and host of I Need Blue. Survivors Talk Surviving. Visit **www.ineedblue.net** for additional stories. As you listen, if the message moves you, share it with friends and family. The more we share, the more we learn, and the more we can help.

Please note, I Need Blue does contain stories which feature graphic content and could be triggering. Please seek help if needed. Remember, you always come first.

Today’s episode speaks on behalf of those children who search for their forever home, who have been removed from their familiar environment for one reason or another and placed into a different permanent or temporary family environment. The hope is always that the new home is a better fit for raising that child. However, situations exist where the child is put in more danger.

I would like to welcome Jaci Cortez. She was born and raised in Los Angeles California. She was in foster care from ages of 4-21. As an advocate for the foster children, she became the Founder and Exec Director of Sunflower Foster Youth Investments where the mission is providing foster youth and former youth in care, with the network of support and resources they need. In addition to holding this position, she is attending CSULA studying Communications Studies. To learn more about Sunflower Foster Youth Investment's Visit: [Sunflower Foster Youth Investment](http://www.sunfloweryouth.org/home)

My second guest, Jayne Amelia Larson, is a volunteer for CASA of Los Angeles Also, she has a podcast, Bonus Babies, where you can find several episodes like the one you will hear today. Bonus babies can be found at www.BonusBabies.com

Jayne

Hi, I’m Jayne Amelia Larson and I’m a CASA, a court appointed special advocate volunteer with youth in foster care. And that means I'm kind of like the eyes and ears of the court for foster youth. I also have a podcast about my work as a CASA in which I talk to kids, therapists, social workers, attorneys, and everybody to give a 360 view of what's happening in foster care today, which is not great.

Jaci

Thank you for doing this. I know there's like 1000’s of issues which are wrong with the world. Foster Care tends to be at the bottom of that list or sometimes not even on that list. Unless you have experienced it, you don't really think about it.

Jen

I am one of those people who is not familiar with the foster care system. I reached out to Jayne because I know as a CASA she has a lot of experience with the foster care system and helping children and youths. I really wanted to spotlight the whole system to people like me, who honestly, don't even think about it.

Jaci

My mom was an immigrant from Guatemala. She got arrested for being in, as a say, the wrong place at the wrong time. She was young and there's consequences to some decisions we make. I was born here, and not allowed to leave with my mom. They decided I was to be put in foster care. I was four years old, when they arrested my mom and decided to deport her. My grandma didn't have papers either at the time, so she wasn't able to get me. She was afraid to get deported as well.

One of my aunts decided to pick me up and my life changed forever. And not exactly in a good way, unfortunately. She adopted me when I was five. I couldn't talk because I went through a traumatic experience with an older family member, an uncle, who had touched me inappropriately. This abuse caused me to stop talking.

Everyone praised my aunt for adopting me. Everyone saw her as this amazing person for adopting a child no one wanted; but that's not true. My mom wanted me, but she wasn't allowed to take me with her. She had all her legal documents. She had everything and all she wanted was me. But again, since I was born here, they said, “no, you can't take her.”

My aunt taught me how to, in her words, be a woman, right? She taught me how to clean and cook. So I had been cleaning and cooking since I was five. She had a son, and I helped raise him. I was changing diapers, feeding, making sure when he cried to stop crying. I’ve technically been taking care of her kids my whole life, but that wasn't the worst part.

Her oldest son was my main abuser; sexually, physically, mentally. He was the person that oversaw disciplining me. I remember when I would get homework wrong, I would get beat, or as they called it, discipline. I think there’s a difference between discipline and abuse, but everyone can interpret that differently based on how they're raised.

I remember, before having the person to discipline me, I loved school. I was like a nerd. Then it turned into me just not wanting to get hit. The abuse worsened and I would get hit for no reason or if they had a bad day. If I didn't do my chores fast enough. I remember hating animals because I had to clean up after their poops and stuff. I was technically their slave, and since my aunt was friends with the social worker who was assigned to the case, nothing got done.

Jen

At age 5 you stopped talking, how did you learn to communicate again?

Jaci

I had to go through speech therapy for a couple years. At first, I thought it was normal, but then once I was able to make friends in school and talking to others, I realized that wasn't normal. But that type of abuse happened for years.

My aunt who adopted me, found a husband through church. He had touched me inappropriately twice. The last time, I was so mad. I had been tired of being people's toy. With my main abuser, who was my cousin, I fought back once, and he knocked me out. He proceeded to do his thing. My aunt's new husband tried to penetrate for the third time, and I was so mad, I grabbed my pocketknife, I grabbed his bottom private part and I told him, “If you ever touch me again, I'm going to chop it off because you're not supposed to do this!” He never did again. When I tried to tell my adoptive mom what was happening, she said I was lying and told me to pray for God’s forgiveness and all this stuff. I was like, “Why would I lie?” I think people choose to believe the narrative that benefits them.

Later, I learned that she was a victim of a lot of different abuses so to her it was normal. Her oldest son also went through stuff, however that's not an excuse to hurt people. I went through hell! I used to call my adoptive mom the devil. She and my own family, put me through some stuff which any kid should not go through. But it is what it is. That's life. Sometimes you just got to figure out a way to escape, right? That's what I did.

I tried to run away a couple times. I remember once was through school. I took this giant backpack, and the counselor told me to wait, and they called my adoptive mom. She had no idea why I wanted to run away. I got beat and figured, well that’s not going to work. The second time was through church, but the church lady returned me. So, I was like, that's not going to work either. So, they took me out of school because they realized they couldn't keep me quiet anymore. My disciplinary and main abuser told me, “if you ever tell anyone I'm going to kill you.” I was scared because I knew he was stronger than me. I was like, this scrawny little thing, but I knew I had to get out of there.

I was being homeschooled, and one day, I pretended I was going next door to get something. I ran. I dumped my books and ran! I ran to the police station and felt like, if they can't help me, I'm screwed. There was one cop that was super helpful. He was new. He's said, “I don't care if you sleep on my couch. I'm not going to let you go back there.” They bought me McDonald's or something. I was starving. They were very helpful, but they couldn't keep me. So they returned me to the house, but said, “we're going to come pick you up tomorrow.” I was like, “Oh my God, what are they going to say?” They told my aunt, I witnessed a fight or something, to explain why I was with them. They didn’t question it.

I was taken away, but at that time, I don't know if DCFS didn't have much funding or something, so I had to spend the first night in foster care, in their office. They had a little room where kids would sleep on the couch.

I was put into foster care around 13 to 13 ½ years old. I was happy because I'm away from those people. But, DCFS’s plan was reunification. I had to see them six months later. They had dropped charges because apparently there was not enough evidence and they had established that I was a liar or something like that.

It broke me, to the point I just wanted to die. I couldn't hurt myself because I was brought up very religious, so I would just pray. Every time I got beat, every time an abuse happened, I used to pray to please just take me away. But that never happened. Foster care taught me that documentation matters. It taught me there's no justice. Honestly, I think everything happens for a reason and while there shouldn't be a reason for someone to go through what I went through, if I can go back, I wouldn’t change anything because it makes me a better person. An open-minded person. I became more protective of myself and others after foster care. I decided I wasn’t going to let no one hurt me again. So far, I've been able to keep that promise.

I got moved around several times, like 10-12 times. One seemed ideal but when they found out I was gay, they kicked me out. The last home was amazing! It was my last few years of foster care. As great as the home was, I think it came a little too late. Amazing family, amazing home, beyond supportive, loving. I remember having a conversation with them where they said, “if we could have got you at age 4, we would have treated you like the Princess you are.” I remember crying and telling them, “It’s okay. That would have been amazing, but it didn't happen. I'm grateful you are in my life now.” It was the first time I really remember feeling like having a family. I didn't get adopted again and the reunification stopped. I told them if they left me there, (with my aunt) I was going to kill myself. So I was in a mental institute for a while when I was younger.

Jayne

Jaci, was in many foster homes. Many people think that a kid gets removed from their biological home or whatever environment they're in, they get moved to foster care, to a foster home, and then they stay there, and everything works out. Often, it does not happen at all that way. Kids can go, just like Jaci did, from home to home to home; from school to school to school. They never have any stability. Never. There's no consistency. There's no safe, forever home for them.

Jen

I'm curious. With Jaci’s situation, there were signs indicating she needed to be removed. She wasn't. What is the determining factors when a child is going to be removed?

Jaci

I don't understand the procedures of how someone becomes foster parents or adoptive parents. I know that DCFS or whoever's in charge of child welfare, I know I'm not the first to have struggled because they dropped the ball.

Jayne

There are all different cases, there's all different scenarios. What I think is important about Jaci’s case is that she saved herself by going to a police station and asking to be rescued. That was the third attempt for help. The first two adults, whom she spoke with, ignored her. It wasn't until she got a good cop who believed her, that was she removed from the home that was so horrible to her. Now, unfortunately, that wasn't the end of it because as Jaci said, in California, the courts are mandated to try to reunify with the family. So, there was an attempt to do that. But again, for Jaci, she made it clear, if you make me stay with them, I'm going to kill myself. So, she saved herself again. Unfortunately, when she did finally find a great foster home that was right for her, she was already a young adult, and aged out.

It is such a complicated process about how kids get removed from their homes, how it happens, why it happens, who gets believed, who gets taken to jail, who gets prosecuted, where that kid goes, each situation is different. Usually, it's not good. There are a lot of mistakes that are made, even by well-intentioned people, unfortunately.

Jaci

I don't think the system wants to be neglectful. But it has been proven time and time again, that they have been.

Jayne

I think the perfect example is when you talked about your caseworker who was a friend of your aunt's and she just overlooked everything. She didn't truly investigate. If she had spoken to you for any length of time, she would have realized that you are talking to truth, you are speaking the truth that you were abused and neglected, treated really, badly. She should have removed you from the home. What happens with caseworkers is they’re supposed to have about 30 kids, but they usually have twice or triple that. There aren’t enough hours in the day for them to do their work properly. They're not paid well either. Even when they start and they are hopeful, and want to make great changes, they often end up burning out quickly and not doing their job.

Jen

Jaci, have you been reunited with your mom and family?

Jaci

After foster care, they found me through Facebook. It was an interesting encounter. I didn't know my mom or my grandma for many years. When they claimed to be my family that never stopped looking and loving me, I was pretty pissed. Once I met with them and saw the evidence, I was able to, not just find closure, but I think it helped them forgive themselves. I know they had a tough time as well so I couldn't be mad at them. I got lucky because not everyone has family members that genuinely care for them. Most of mine were interesting, for lack of better words.

My mom, grandma and brother never gave up looking for me. I think that's what made our reunification better because I was able to heal, and they were able to heal as well. We still have a relationship. I think for people listening, it's important to know that when you foster or adopt, we're more than just our background. These kids, including myself, when I was a child and a young adult, we went through stuff. Not because we asked for it, or because we were troubled kids, these adults chose us to do harm to us. I don't understand how society judges us because of these monsters’ decision. I just want listeners and people to know if they've ever been hurt or abused or anything negative, never give up. Nothing lasts forever.

You can find the light and help others, or you can heal and love yourself. I know for years I was filled with hate and hurt, and I wouldn't wish it to my worst enemy. I forgave my abuser. I didn't want to be angry anymore. Forgiving them wasn’t easy. I don't want to say it was like excusing them because what they did was wrong, but I had to do it so I could move on. I missed being me and just being a nice person. But again, being nice doesn't mean that you're weak.

Foster kids are more than their experience. It's a label that sticks with us, unfortunately. Am I a survivor, yes. But people who know me, know me for more than that. Foster Care is just a location that we were put or placed in; we didn't have stability. That shouldn't define us because at the end of the day, it doesn't matter. As adults, we decide who and what we become, and most of us, we continue to help others. If that's not amazing, then I don't know what it is. I'm grateful for every step I had to take to have the mindset I have now.

Jen

Such words of wisdom and strength. Thank you. Jaci. Would you like to tell us about your nonprofit, Sunflower Foster Youth Investment.

Jaci

I started a nonprofit to invest in foster youth because I saw a lot of us are falling in between the cracks. I started sunflower Foster Youth Investment so any youth over the age of 16, who has a goal or dream, my team, we're going to help them get there. There are age restrictions because of funding, but I don't think there's an age limit for success. There are many negative statistics surrounding foster youths. I think the most positive one is 3% go to college; that is not positive. Sunflower Foster Youth Investment was created, because I got tired of seeing these young adults and kids being thrown around in a negative light.

We make sure it's realistic. I know a lot of youths join programs because there's a need, but there's a lot of requirements they are forced to do. That's not our program; our program meets them where they're at. The only requirement again, is that they were in foster care even for a day, and they're 16 and older. I wanted to make sure our next generation of foster youth had a better chance than my generation. I'm not saying my generation wasn't good and I think DCFS has created updates to their programs. Now there's more LGBT friendly stuff, as well as undocumented resources. They have improved, but I think it still needs to do better. Sunflower Foster Youth Investment wants to help DCFS fill in those gaps, because I know they can't do it all. We appreciate their effort, but we know our youth need more support. They're the kids of the future, not something society sees as a burden.

Jen

Thank you for sharing your story with me. The encouraging words you are providing others is amazing. I thank you for all you do.

Jayne

And you are truly of terrific advocate Jaci. You really are admirable.

Jaci

Thank you. I appreciate it. If someone wants to make an impact, it doesn't need to be a lot of things. This takes one step to make a difference. Most people don't know how to take that step, so they don't. But if there was a way for people to help, I know they will. Like CASA, they make it easy for people to help foster you. They have a great program. It's easy, and it's super important. I think that's what helped me realize that change is possible. We must create a path for it to happen. Thank you, ladies, for your time.

Jen

Jayne, can you tell us what training or classes you had to take to become a CASA?

Jayne

So the word CASA, stands for court appointed special advocate volunteer for youth in foster care. In some states, it's called guardian ad litem and the program exists in every state. It was started by a judge in Seattle over 50 years ago, who in family court, he said, the foster care system is not working. These kids need somebody looking out for them because they get lost. He asked for volunteers and amazingly, he got, hundreds at the time. Now that program has grown nationwide.

There is a vetting process you must go through, and the interview process is quite thorough. There's a training process that's approximately six weeks long. Very doable for anybody that has a full-time job. I have three jobs like most people these days, and I had plenty of time to do it. At the very beginning, as you're learning what you need to do, it does take more time. But then once you figure out the system, the acronyms, the services, and all that, then it can work easily. When I first did the training, I had some trepidation because I thought, “Wow, is it going to be too hard? Am I going to be able to do it?” There was another CASA, a board member of Casa LA, who basically said to me, if you make one thing in a child's life better, than it's worth it. I really got that, and it has been true.

The way a CASA works is they act as the eyes and ears of the court to help the child get the services they need and to also listen to what the child wants, and needs are. Often, they act as the educational rights holder to make sure their schooling is what it should be. As we were just saying a moment ago, for a foster kid if they get moved from home to home to home, they will most usually get moved from school to school to school. So they often fall behind, as with any kid. If they went to three different schools in one year, which could happen, the CASA acts as the hub of information as well.

The CASA is the only one who is talking to the social worker, the kid, the attorney, the court, the caregivers, the therapist, the doctors. The CASA is often the only one who's talking to everybody because the CASA is a volunteer position. Nobody owns the CASA. He or she is not paid to look after the child. In fact, one of the things the kids often ask, because they're used to this team of people who are paid to look after them, is “you're not paid to take care of me, you're not paid to be here?” The kids are often in shock. That happened with me with my kid. She couldn't believe I was there because I wanted to make a difference and I cared about her.

What is very important about the CASA role is very often, the kids who are assigned to CASA are the neediest. I'll give you an example, in Los Angeles where I am, there's 35,000 kids at any one time in the foster care system. There's only 1200 CASA’s so not every kid can get a CASA. That's true all over the country. There also are not enough classes from all walks of life. And what I mean is we don't have enough men, we don't have enough people of color, we don't have enough people of different sexual preferences or identities. Kids need to see people like them. As adults, they need role models. I encourage anybody out there who's listening, if you have a little bit of free time, around 15 hours a month, become a CASA or at least look into it. You can go through the training and see if it's right for you. You can talk to the <https://nationalcasagal.org/> and they have great information on their site. You can find out where in your state or county you should apply to. And as I said, there is an interview process and then there's a training process. The training is really great, really thorough. I did mine pre COVID so it was in person on the weekends. Now they have it almost exclusively online, which is really convenient for a lot of people.

What’s most important is the fact the kid has one person looking out for them, who's really paying attention. One adult who's really paying attention, can make all the difference; it can completely change their lives.

Jen

What inspired you to become a CASA?

Jayne

I've always volunteered with kids. At first with arts organizations doing plays and things like that. Then about five years ago, my boyfriend started volunteering at Peace4Kids, <https://www.peace4kids.org/> which serves the foster care community in the Willowbrook area of Los Angeles. He started going on Saturdays to work with youth in foster care exclusively as a volunteer. Peace4Kids, has been around for about 25 years. It's a fantastic organization. I saw what he was doing, and I was like, I want to do this. I started to join him on Saturdays and soon, I was looking around and I would hear this term, CASA, CASA, CASA. I thought, what's a CASA? I looked into it and I took, what my boyfriend likes to say, “I took the deep dive,” and I decided to become a CASA. I realized I wanted more one-to-one time with a kid. I saw how truly beneficial a CASA program is and I wanted to make more of a difference. I thought I could probably do it. It turns out I can. I love it. I think I've made a really big difference in my kid's life. She's about to be adopted very happily by a family member. It's taken a long time; she had several placements. I met her when she was 6 years old. She's had a lot of problems and a lot of behavioral issues, with a lot of heartbreak, and disappointments, but now she's a very happy and well-adjusted 10-year-old. She’s doing great in school. I'm the ed rights holder so I have made sure she got all the correct schooling that she needed as well as any special attention. Now she's about to be adopted by a young cousin of hers who stepped up to take care of her. I’ll have another kid soon.

Jen

How special for you to witness that. Let me ask you, how do you not become so connected to the child that you want to just be the forever home for all of them?

Jayne

Well, that’s an interesting point that you bring up. The role of the CASA is not to be the child's friend. The role of the CASA is to be the child's advocate. One of the things that a CASA must pay attention to is making sure they are not overly emotionally invested. The CASA needs to protect him or herself. There's a lot of rules in place to help us do that. For instance, a child never comes to my home, she doesn't hang out with my family; I do activities with her, I go on outings with her, I spend afternoons with her, but I don't bring her into my personal life. I'm not there as a big sister, or as a family friend, I am there as her advocate. Even though she will always be in my life, and I will always stay in touch with her, it's not in the same way that people think like an auntie or something. It's much more of a professional relationship. Even though she tells me that she loves me, and I tell her that I love her, I'm not her mom. I'm not her aunt. I'm her CASA. My role is to look out for her and to advocate for her.

The fact there is that distinction makes the work easier, because otherwise I could imagine it would be overwhelming. In most states, a CASA is assigned only one child, however sometimes you might get a sibling set. That's important because very often kids are separated when they're removed from the home. There are some cases that will take two or three kids to work with them together. In general, the CASA only has one child at a time to focus on that child and then once that child is placed appropriately, either goes into legal guardianship or gets adopted, then the CASA will be assigned to another child if he or she chooses to continue and most of us do, because the work is so rewarding. It's so important.

As I said, you can save a child's life. But there's one other thing Jaci mentioned that I think is important to bring up. Foster kids are thought of as “problem children”, “criminals”, “the victims”, “the kids that are they're going to get in trouble”. The reality is these are kids, who by no fault of their own, are failed by their families, and then very often failed again by a system that was meant to safeguard them. The foster care system is profoundly broken. Kids get lost, as you heard with Jaci, she went from foster home to foster home from to a foster home. Now, you can tell just by listening to Jaci she's not a typical kid because she was hurting, and she was lost. She needed somebody to look after her in a fair and good way and she didn't get that until she was almost 16 years old.

One of the missions of Peace4Kids is to change the narrative about foster children and how they're portrayed not only in the media, but in society in general. The truth is, they're just kids who need care and protection and love, just like most kids. Very often they don't have it, they don't have any of that. I believe as a person in this world today, whatever we can do for our youth, it's just about the most important thing to secure a better future for them. As I've said, I have found the work very valuable, and as most people say, when you volunteer very often you get as much out of it as the people you're helping. That's certainly been true of me. It's changed my life. It's changed the way I look at things.

In part, that is why I launched my own podcast, and I named it Bonus Babies. I didn't name it “at risk kids” or “problem foster youth”, “tales from the foster care hell” or something like that. I named it Bonus Babies because a lovely woman whom I know named Dory Woods has fostered over 30 foster children in 26 years. She's a warm and loving foster mom and she’s taken care of kids really, well. She calls her kids, bonus babies; not foster kids or foster youth, the problem kids, or at-risk kids, scoundrel or whatever. She calls them bonus babies because she wants to empower them and let them know that they're wanted, they deserve to be here and they're bonuses. I think it's an important message.

I'm in my second season of Bonus Babies, and at least half of the stories I have heard are from kids in care had been kids who saved themselves, kids who reached out to adults and who did not look after them. For example, Jaci, went to a cop station on her own and saved herself. Melanie reported her abuse to the police and that cop also believed her and said, “Alright, let's put this guy in jail.” And she put her own father in jail for abusing her. Vaughn, at four years old, threw himself out of a third story window because his mother was using him as a punching bag. He saved himself. My podcast has those stories. But it also includes the way a CASA works. I talked to attorneys, therapists, and social workers; all the people involved in looking after youth in foster care to give a 360 view of what's happening in the foster care system today, which as I've said, is failing our kids. My goal is to create awareness about that and to ideally enact positive social change.

If there's anybody listening right now, who's thinking that they might want to be a foster parent, please do investigate it. Because we need good foster parents. It's essential for the well-being of these kids who are failed by their biological families, that they are taken in by loving and caring responsible adults who show them a better way. Who helped them to grow up into healthy and happy adults? Foster parents are very, very, very much needed. CASA’s and foster parents, if you're out there, come on in. We need you. We need you. We need you.

Jen

What do you think is the number one reason people say, “Oh, I could never be a foster parent.”

Jayne

There's one guest of mine, Dina Murray, she and her husband fostered dozens of children and they ended up adopting 12 or 13, I believe which is unusual. The way she describes it is that she had love in her heart to give, she and her husband had love in their hearts to give to children. They knew there were children out there that needed them. I think if you have it in you, to want to love a child who is not loved, you can save a child's life. I can't think of anything better to do than to save a child's life. There are so many kids in need, 650,000 at any one time in this country in the United States alone. 650,000 kids who get lost in foster care, only some of them will end up being reunited with their families. Most of the kids are removed from the home because of neglect and it's often because the parents can't afford to take care of them. The moms working 3 jobs and the kids are at home. They're looking after each other and somebody reports the fact that there's three kids under the age of 10, alone at home, and then CPS is called child protection services. The kids get removed from the home. Very often the mom, they must complete all kinds of programs and get all kinds of training to get the kids back. Sometimes it's difficult to do.

People think foster kids are difficult. They're not difficult, they're just kids. That's it. They're just kids. Yes, some of them have more needs than others but what they mostly need is love, consistency, a safe place, food on the table, warm clothing, and a loving environment so they can grow and prosper.

Jen

I really appreciate you sharing all this information with us today. You can hear the love and the passion you have.

Jayne

It wasn't until I became a CASA that I understood foster kids are superheroes. They are amazingly adaptable, resourceful, resilient, and the fact that even some of them make it through a terrible system, is simply because they are amazing. They are superheroes. They are the real superheroes. Thank you very much for letting me talk about it today. The CASA program is an important program. I hope your listeners out there become interested and I hope there's others out there that want to become foster parents because there's a tremendous need.

Jen

Absolutely, thank you both for being my guests! To check out more stories visit, [www.ineedblue.net](http://www.ineedblue.net)

To hear bonus babies visit, [www.bonusbabies.com](http://www.bonusbabies.com)

To learn more about Sunflower Foster Youth Investment's Visit: [Sunflower Foster Youth Investment](http://www.sunfloweryouth.org/home)

Peace4Kids, <https://www.peace4kids.org/> which serves the foster care community in the Willowbrook area of Los Angeles.

For more information about becoming a CASA: the <https://nationalcasagal.org/>