Welcome back. This is Jen Lee, 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 the story 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 sensitive topics which could be triggering. Please seek help if needed and remember, you always come first.

August for some represents back to school. I remember my mom taking my sister and I to Kmart to purchase all our school supplies. We would do school clothes shopping, and slowly we had to go to bed a little earlier to get ready for the school schedule. I remember being excited to see my friends again, however the thought of starting over, because it was a new year with tougher classes, new teachers, and new kids to deal with, there was some apprehension.

Fortunately for me, I had my parents and my sister. My sister and I were only two years apart. We rode the same bus and attended the same school most of the time. I had the support, love, and encouragement I needed each year. For some kids who are still trying to find a forever home, back to school is a reminder they don't have that support. It's another new social situation which is just downright scary. And homework who is going to help with that?

During May in Brevard County, Florida, there were 1046 kids in dependency court. As if that statistic isn't alarming enough, not each child has a volunteer, a Guardian Ad Litem. The Guardian Ad Litem is a child's eyes and ears, and they advocate for their well-being to make sure they are getting what they need. Today's episode is filled with love, passion, and purpose.

My first guest, Mary was removed from her home during her sensitive teen years. She had been sexually abused by a family member. As you hear her describe how these events left her emotionally devastated at an age where navigating such things were already challenging, you will learn how asking questions is key. Today Mary is a volunteer, a Guardian Ad Litem to advocate for a child. She asks the questions and gets the answers, so a child has the best possible path for their future success.

My next guest is Jenny James. She is a Child Advocate Manager. She provides support for volunteers such as Mary. When you take on the rewarding journey of becoming a Guardian Ad Litem you have support. Jenny is here to share her journey and explain the ways she supports volunteers. It is a team effort.

Also here today is Cynthia Rickard. She is a Volunteer Recruiter. Currently there are not enough volunteers. Not every child in dependency court has an advocate. You will be touched by this episode and if you find yourself asking the question, maybe I can do this? Cynthia is the lady we will connect you with. She loves educating and connecting people. Ladies, I am thankful each of you are here to talk about your role in helping our children find a forever home.

*Cynthia:* 5:00

Hello, this is Cynthia Rickard, the Volunteer Recruiter with the Guardian Ad Litem program. I'm just very grateful to be here this morning.

*Mary:* 5:07

Hello, my name is Mary. I'm a Guardian Ad Litem. Thank you for having me.

*Jenny James:* 5:13

Hi, this is Jenny James. I'm the Child Advocate Manager from The Guardian program. Thanks for having us.

*Jen:* 5:20

Ladies, it is my pleasure. Let's begin this episode with Mary. As noted in the introduction, you are a survivor of sexual assault. You took that experience and decided to use it to help other children. Thank you for sharing your story with us.

*Mary:* 5:43

Yes, thank you, I really appreciate you having me. When I was seven years old, I was sexually abused by a family member. It was ongoing for a long period of time. As all secrets go, that one couldn't stay a secret forever. Family members and other close members, started to discover what was happening and when they discovered it, no one did anything about it. Like a lot of families, they cover it up and they hide it. It wasn't ever addressed. It was never talked to me other than to say, "we're aware of what happened and it's over. It's not going to happen again." They expected me to move on with my life from there. What happens when you're so young, at the time I was seven, it changes who you are inside. It changes your ability to bond with your own family or to be a part of the family. As the years went on, and I go through puberty and become more aware of my surroundings and my own body, I became an angry screaming person. I rebelled against everything around me. I couldn’t be part of my family, I wasn't able to be part of society, I wasn't able to be part of anything around me. I rejected the notion that anybody, even in my family, could possibly care about me.

*Jen* 7:05

Because you rejected all of that, was there any place where you felt safe?

*Mary:* 7:10

I think one of the common misconceptions I hear about foster care is that everybody is there because their parents don’t love them, or their family doesn’t want them. In my case, that wasn’t true. I did come from a family that loved me and wanted me, but it was also a family which included extreme generational dysfunction, and a lot of untreated mental illness. I did feel wanted on one hand, and then on the other hand, I felt as though I just simply wasn't part of them. I wasn't like them. I was different from them. I was the teenager who would break all the rules, do whatever they want, getting arrested etc. However, no one focused on what was going on at the root of it.

It was a family full of dysfunction, mental illness and full of secrets. Somebody often becomes “the one” that gets pointed out as the problem person because they are always questioning everything going on around them. The family bands together proclaiming this is the problem person; the one causing all the trouble. What really is happening is they’re the truth speaker. They're the ones saying there's a problem here. This isn't normal.

*Jen:* 8:49

Was there any type of therapy? I know you said there was family history of illness. Was there any help?

*Mary:* 8:57

No, all through those years, I did not get any therapy. At age 14, I was locked up in a facility for girls. It is in Portland, OR. They used DBT Dialectical Behavioral Therapy, and it changed my life. The general perception of a lockup facility is bad. You get these imageries of juvenile detention centers from TV where everybody's scared. I went in kicking and screaming. They dragged me in kicking and screaming and I'm thinking I'm going to be here for the rest of my life. At 14, that's what you know, that's what you think your life is about to end. I probably bucked the system for the first three months, ended up in isolation, resulting in a lot of time to think about myself before I finally gave myself over to the treatment. It changed the way I thought about things forever. It changed the processes and how I approach things inside my own mind. I was supposed to be there until I turned 18, but through hard work with both me and my family, I was out in 9 months. My family had to dedicate 30 hours of treatment to the program.

*Guardian Ad Litem Sponsor:* 10:27

Sponsor message: We hear news stories daily, about children being removed from homes due to abuse, abandonment, or neglect. We assume there is a program that will speak up for these children. The Guardian Ad Litem office does just that. In Florida, Guardian Ad Litem provides the child with an attorney, a trained volunteer, and a certified Child Advocate Manager. All three work together focusing on the child's safety, welfare, and best interests. In what ways did it change you?

*Mary:* 11:05

First, I wasn't even asking myself questions before I went in there. I wasn't asking, why do I behave the way I behave? Why do I feel as though I am not a part of anything? Why do I have so much anxiety? Why do I have so much anger and as a teenage girl? It happens often but not in every case where you become very sexually promiscuous. If you've been sexually abused, you have no sanctity of self anymore. They forced me to look inwardly and ask myself a lot of questions about who I am and why I'm behaving this way. It forced me and my family to face it head on.

*Jen:* 11:50

So they work to make you recognize your trauma and the memories and I imagine they reinforced that what happened is not normal, that it wasn't okay, and it wasn't your fault?

*Mary:* 12:03

Absolutely, but they also taught about what happens to your brain. As a young child, when you become sexually abused, that changes who you are. It changes your development. Even something as simple as other preteen girls 10-11 years old, who are starting to get excited about boys and they're talking about boys, but you already have all this knowledge. You can't share that with them so suddenly you become a liar within your group of friends. You're pretending like you don't know; you're faking it. You're pretending your way through the world. There's a lot of guilt and shame not only from the abuse, but then everything that happens to cover up the abuse.

*Jen:* 12:45

There are several people who bury the memories, and they don't remember the abuse until they have flashbacks. It sounds like it was present all the time for you?

*Mary:* 13:00

Yes, I would agree, it was not only present in my mind, but through smells, through sounds, through textures. It never left me it; it was always there. There was a feeling that I was part of the perpetration of that abuse because it was treated like a dirty secret. In my mind, if you were a victim, why would everybody try to cover it up like that?

Another thing they taught me in therapy, and it's not very often discussed, is that your body is a human body. Sometimes it's going to respond to stimulus. In my case, I remember responding to the stimulus of the abuse. At seven years old, there were parts of it that I found enjoyable. That is something that creates an even bigger feeling of shame inside your own mind because now the perpetrator has made you, as a young child, enjoy the feeling of what's happening. You now feel like you’re part of it, instead of it being something that's happening to you, you feel like you become part of the abuse.

*Jen:* 14:06

At age 14, you found this treatment which was helpful to you. Your parents were involved in the process. Is that correct?

*Mary:* 14:21

That's correct. Before I went there, I spent a few years in foster care, and I never had a Guardian. I'm not sure if at that time in Portland, Oregon, if Guardian Ad Litems were available. I can only imagine how things would have been different for me if I had a Guardian Ad Litem to talk to. I didn't have anybody on my side to talk to. I got into Rosemont when they signed me over to the state when I was at 14. While there they court ordered me and my family to spend 30 hours of therapy through their program. Looking back, I had a smart judge because the judge said, "you know, this is a family issue. This isn't a child issue." Typically, this issue was considered a child issue, not a family issue. A 10–11-year-old, doesn't get into the positions they're in on their own? They get there as a group.

*Jen:* 15:37

What did your family take away from the treatment place?

*Mary:* 15:43

It's something I would have to ask them. I know they had a greater respect for me after the treatment place. When they talked to me, they treated me with more honor and respect. I don't know how much they personally internalized for themselves, but they did begin to treat me differently.

*Jen:* 16:04

Okay, let's fast forward a little bit. Tell me where your life journey is headed.

*Mary:* 16:10

I had three children since then. All the while, I'm always thinking, I want to use my life experiences to help other people. When I was 19, I originally heard of the CASA program, and I began the training, but it triggered me too much. As I was doing some of the training, I was feeling, I'm not ready for this. Some nights, I would lay in bed and cry realizing I can't do this yet. I'm not ready. I put it out of my mind.

After raising my three kids, two of them have left the house now and I only have one left in the home, I'd spent years working on myself. Inside my own mind, I have all this mama bear energy left. I want to reach children; I want to help them. There's also this notion as they grew up, I'd look at them and say, "they turned out all right! They're fantastic." I decided to reach out to the Guardian Ad Litem program and began working with Cynthia and Jennifer James, to see how I can use my experiences to help other kids.

*Jen:* 17:19

Can you tell us about that journey?

*Mary:* 17:23

For me, it started at the beginning of the pandemic. I'm 45 now compared to the 19-year-old I was when I first started the training to be a CASA. Everything goes into lockdown. My two older kids, who were adult children living in the house, decided to move out at the same time. I wasn't emotionally prepared for that empty nest. For the first six months, I was just sitting around wondering what to do with myself now?

I went to visit my daughter. My niece and nephew came to visit. During that visit, they told me about a family member sexually abusing them. One of the things which I think is most important is I had a sense that there was something going on with these children and because of my own abuse in my own life, I felt maybe I was projecting feelings. I was being hyper vigilant. I didn't ask the right questions. I didn't want to be too intrusive. I kept telling the adults around the children, maybe they should get into therapy because I recognize some of the behaviors.

When you go through the process the way I went through it, you're surrounded by girls who have been sexually abused and they all display similar behaviors. I had recognized that in these kids. I was pointing it out to other people, but I didn't put the responsibility on myself to simply ask them. When I did finally ask, it was like the weight of the world had been lifted off their shoulders. I just simply asked, "Do you ever feel that you have been sexually abused?" Instantly in a second, this girl broke down crying. You could see her shoulders slumped down. It was like this huge exhale, and she started crying and telling me everything.

I should have asked years before. There's a part of my mind which became so angry this happened to them; I was their aunt and around them on a regular basis, how could it happen and me not be there to help them? The family member is currently in jail, awaiting trial. I'm so tired of watching these kids get hurt. Watching the secrecy and the silence of it. It's deplorable, and I'm tired of watching it. I don't want to sit around and complain about being tired of watching it. I want to do something, I don't want to just be a complainer, I want to be a person of action

*Jen:* 20:50

I love that you decided to take what you had been through and use it to give back to help someone. Do you currently have a child that you are helping?

*Mary:* 21:01

I am working on my first case with a lovely family. We are going through the process of everything they need to do to get reunified, which is the goal, if possible. The common misconception is these children are unloved or unwanted. That is not always the case. Sometimes families are full of dysfunction, and they're full of their own demons they need to face so that they can be reunified. That's what's happening in my case.

*Jen:* 21:44

Have you discovered any new triggers which you didn't realize were there?

*Mary:* 21:50

There are things you're fighting in your mind all the time. If you've lived with abuse or attack or anything, you struggle with it all the time and learn a way of coping and rationalizing with it so that you can live on.

*Jen:* 22:03

Being a Guardian Ad Litem is very special. But as special as it is, it still has its challenges. One thing I learned is you do have a support system. My next guest, Jenny James is a support system for you as well as other Guardian Ad Litems. I would love for Jenny to share a little bit about what she does and Mary how the support has benefited you.

*Jenny James:* 22:37

I feel very fortunate to have met Mary. Not only is my job to help guide her, but she’s taught me a lot about the children we serve. She's helped to give me pointers coming from her unique perspective. I was talking to her about a plan I had to help bring a child from runaway and she says, "Oh, that's not going to work. She doesn't want to hear that. Try this. This is what she needs to know." It's amazing because it's still a learning process for me, and I love my Guardians because as much as I'm here to help them, they bring these unique life experiences that teach me every day too. It's a wonderful give and take.

I give support. It's a lot when you first come in, and some people get nervous about coming to court and representing the best interest of a child. We're here, not only me, but we have the most fantastic attorneys. We're a team. We're an advocacy team; the volunteer, me and they have the attorney. We're here to help guide and offer suggestions. It's amazing to see someone like Mary come into her first case and help her child so much. She's present. She is present in his life. She fought to get him heard by the judge. It was amazing. Gave him a pep talk so he got to tell his truth to the judge. It was life changing for him and for me too; I was so proud of her. We were worried he might not have that courage, but she gave him that support. We are the voice for the child.

*Jen:* 24:40

Mary, can you share your experience?

*Mary:* 24:52

It's my first case so I don't usually feel like I'm doing great. I usually go to Jennifer James and I'm like, "What would you do now?" And she says, "You know what I would do is this and this..." Normally, I still have a lot of questions, and I fall back on her advice because she's far more experienced than I.

I think each case is going to be different and while listening to some of the other Guardians, they have cases which I haven't come into contact with yet. Each case has its own layering.

*Jen:* 25:41

Every Guardian Ad Litem is going to have their first case. Is there something you didn't expect that happened?

*Mary:* 25:56

I would say what has surprised me the most is the need to people-please. It's my job to work for the child and to focus on the child. I wasn't prepared for the bombardment of other people in the child's life coming at me with their needs, also. I must constantly remind myself I'm here for the child. I must focus on the child's needs. If mom's upset about this, or dad's upset about this, or grandma's upset about this, I must stay focused on what is in the best interest of the child. I do hear them out and if it's possible, if it aligns with the best interests of the child, then, I'll put my attention to it. Ultimately, I must stay focused, and I can't be a people-pleaser; I can't make everybody happy.

*Jen:* 27:08

Jenny, do you want to share with us how long you've been in this supporting role and what inspired you?

*Jenny James:* 27:18

Absolutely, I have been with the program five years. I was a volunteer previously, and much like Mary, my children have left the nest. I knew I wasn't done helping children. I had a lot more to give. I have several friends that were involved in this program who knew me and kept telling me this program is for you. I had just gone through a divorce and gotten my master’s in psychology.

I realized this is where I needed to be, so I started volunteering, and it's addictive. I just loved it. I kept taking more cases and helping these children. I started out with babies, and found I loved working with teenagers. A job opportunity became available, and I decided I would love to come do this. It's expanded my horizon to get to meet wonderful people like Mary and Cynthia. Everyone who's involved in our program has this passion to help children. It's what unites us. We have desire to help children and I just can't speak enough about the people I work with.

*Jen*

Is there a particular case which is most memorable?

*Jenny James:* 28:48

Yes, I still have the case. It's an ongoing case, and she got sent to live with her father. I was devastated because I loved seeing her. I was happy for her, but unfortunately, it became a dangerous situation. Before she left, we came up with a code word she could use if we were on the phone and things weren't good. It was a secret way to say, “I need help.”

We were on the phone, and she said the code word. The case manager and I were able to get the police to do a wellness check. We found the child was being abused. We got her removed from the parent and back to safety. I feel very proud we were able to have that trust with her. She trusted me enough to know I would get her out of trouble if she needed it. It's the trust we build with these children which lets them know we are there for them. We are there to hear them. It isn't about what mom or dad want. We're really listening and able to do things to help that child. I think that's what makes us unique and makes that relationship so special with these children. They know they can count on their Guardian.

*Jen:* 30:22

In that instance, was the child required to call and check in?

*Jenny James:* 30:27

We check in monthly with our kids. Usually, most of us do it more often. It's used to build a relationship and like I said, building that relationship, having trust, and her knowing if she needed help, I would get it, it's an honor. It's a privilege that I carry today.

*Jen:* 30:54

I love that you used to code word. Is that standard practice?

*Jenny James:* 30:59

I was thinking on my feet because I knew it might be hard for her. Speaking about abuse in front of the people that are perpetrating, it's not always possible. I came up with a way for her to tell me something's wrong, without having to say it.

*Guardian Ad Litem sponsorship:* 31:21

Have you ever thought of what it is like to be a child in a courtroom?  When a child is removed from their home because of abuse, abandonment, or neglect. The Guardian ad Litem Office advocates for the child’s best interests and represents them in court and in the community.

The Office uses a multidisciplinary team consisting of an attorney, a trained volunteer, and a child advocate manager. Not only do they provide support and request services needed to change children’s lives positively, but they also bring comfort and warm smiles during difficult times.  The Guardian ad Litem Office focuses on the child's legal needs, makes sure their voices are heard, and the child’s safety. Their focus is solely on the child.

If you are passionate about children and want to make a difference in a child’s life, you can help by becoming a Guardian ad Litem volunteer.  To learn more, reach out to recruiter, Cynthia Rickerd at (321) 271-1304, or visit us at [www.Guardianadlitem.org](http://www.Guardianadlitem.org).

*Jen:* 33:50

What has been your biggest takeaway since you started working with Mary?

*Jenny James:* 33:58

How incredibly giving our volunteers are. She's exemplifies just giving of herself, her time, and her knowledge. I'm blown away daily by what I see from our volunteers. They're just incredible. The amount of time and dedication they give to these children. They inspire me daily.

*Jen:* 34:22

Mary, what is your biggest takeaway thus far from working with Jenny and soaking up all of her experience?

*Mary:* 34:31

I don't know where she gets her energy, or time. She works on a lot of cases. Currently I have one and I'm still trying to wrap my brain around all of it. I'm new so I can only take on one case while I'm learning. When we don't get more volunteers, then people must take on many cases and they don't have the time and energy to spread out like they want to and really focus on each child.

*Jenny James:* 35:12

We're a volunteer-based organization so that's our focus. We want to get as many wonderful people as possible like Mary assigned to these wonderful children.

*Jen:* 35:22

Cynthia is the recruiter and plays a very essential role in helping children. Can you tell us a little bit about yourself and what inspired you to join this program?

*Cynthia:* 35:42

I had been at home with my kids, and when they got older, I decided I wanted to go back to work to do something meaningful. I started with the Guardian Ad Litem program as a legal secretary, and then moved into the volunteer role, which is really where my heart is. I love people, I love getting out into the community, and spreading the word. I enjoy the one-on-one interviews with the people who come forward. What I love most is building relationships with people.

*I Need Blue LLC*

How do you find volunteers?

*Cynthia:*

Word of mouth is our number one way of recruiting people. When someone like Mary shares her story about how helping a child has transformed her life, people listen. She'll talk about something that's motivated her and so it encourages other people to step forward. We're also out in the community. We go to farmers markets, to libraries and wherever we can get plugged in.

*Jen*

When you're talking to people, what is the biggest objection as to why they feel they could not become a Guardian Ad Litem?

*Cynthia:*

They think you need a special credential, or you need to already be a parent. In reality, all you need is an open heart and an open mind. We are going to give you the trainings to empower you to be the best advocate possible.

*Jen*

Describe the process.

*Cynthia:*

You need to be 21 and pass a level two background check that is free of charge to you. Then we are going to provide you with a comprehensive training which is 30 hours. The beauty of that training is you get to do it at home, on your computer, on your schedule, and what works for you.

We have people that are retired and can get those trainings to me in two weeks. We have others that aren't empty nesters, have kids, and they delegate 2-3 hours every weekend to get those trainings done. It might take them two months, but that's ok. We give people 6 months in which to complete everything.

Once they're done with a portion of those trainings, they're going to attend an all-day event that we call a pre-service. You're going to meet with our trainer and myself. You will get an overview of everything you've learned; what it means to be a volunteer, what it means to be abused, abandoned, and neglected. They're going to learn about child welfare and so much more in that process. The trainer will give county specific information for court, they'll go over how to write a judicial review report.

After the training, you're now in your provisional phase, and you can pick a case. What is beautiful is you get to pick your case. So, if your heart gravitates towards a seven-year-old girl, and you read a little synopsis of what she's been through, and you want to help her, you can do that. We're going to give you a mentor for 60 days, because we know that's when you have the most questions. They go with you on that first visit, they wrap their arms around you and help you get through that.

After the 60 days, the mentor goes away, but you're still part of that team. Like Jennifer James, she’s, our CAM. The team includes the volunteer, the Child Advocate Manager (CAM), and then you're also going to be given the attorney for any of the legal issues which may arise in the case. They are with you the entire time. You're never alone in this journey!

*Jen:* 41:22

How many people do you need right now for every child to have a volunteer?

*Cynthia:* 41:33

We have currently 1,046 kids in care and not all of those have volunteers. We do not have enough volunteers for each child to have that one on one person in their life. If we don't have a volunteer, than the CAMS take on those cases. They have so many kids they work with, they may not be able to give them that one on one attention that is so needed.

A volunteer can provide the attention through those visits. All we ask is you meet with your child once a month. That is the commitment level we're asking. Obviously, if you want to meet them more than once a month, we love that idea. We can pick up the phone, we can FaceTime, depending on their age, we text because that's what makes them happy. We need many volunteers, including male volunteers. Men are especially needed because a lot of these children come from broken homes, and they don't have a father figure. Or if they do, he may not be an ideal father figure, so having a man in their life that can be positive, nurture, guide them, and love them is so important.

What we can do with our children is big! There is a need because so many of our kids do not have that one-on-one time dedicated to them. Volunteers can do that. Yes, as a volunteer, you can do so much for that child.

*Jen*

How do you not become attached to the child that you help and want to take care of them forever?

*Mary:* 43:37

I don't think you don't become attached to them. I love the child that I'm working with right now; I think there's always going to be a level of attachment. You are filling in a spot in their life, where they need somebody to feel attached to them. They need somebody to feel like they want to fight for them. That's what they need. Part of that is just sort of embracing that feeling of, I’m here for them. Get to know them and embrace it because that is what the child needs.

*Jenny James:* 44:17

You often transition from being a Guardian Ad Litem to being a natural support in their life. I have cases where some of my girls are now moms and I've got to enjoy baby showers and seeing the birth of their first child. The relationship extends and you don't have to let it go. It depends on the child and if they still want me to talk, share joys and sorrows in their lives, etc. I'm very open to that bond. It just transitions to a natural support later in life.

*Jen:* 44:58

Have you ever had a situation where the child reunification was not possible? Or they were not able to find their forever home and they ended up aging out of foster care? Have you ever had to personally experience that?

*Jenny James:* 45:13

I have. It's difficult when that happens, but we have great resources that you come in contact through working. We have extended foster programs that help them get free college assistance with housing, cars, driver's license. You get to watch them blossom into an adult. It's hard when reunification doesn't happen, but it doesn't mean it's the end of the road. We offer and try to support to make the best situation possible for them to start adulthood with that leg up through education, housing assistance, etc.

*Guardian Ad Litem Sponsor:* 45:58

The Guardian ad Litem Office is an organization where the actions of a single individual can have a profound impact on the life of a child. Would you like to be an integral part of the solution?  Be that one individual trained and empowered to advocate for the best interests of a child. If your heart is saying, “yes,” please reach out to recruiter**,** Cynthia Rickerd (321) 271-1304 or visit usat[www.Guardianadlitem.org](http://www.Guardianadlitem.org). There is no better time than right now!

*Cynthia:* 46:47

If your heartstrings are being pulled and you want to take the next step, look up the Guardian Ad Litem program. There is a huge need for volunteers right now, as not all our children have the one-on- one volunteers. We are about one constant person in their life that they can count on to follow thru. When we say we're going to take you to the beach, we do that. For a lot of kids, we're that first person in their life, that follows thru with what they promise.

*Jen*

If someone is not able to be a Guardian Ad Litem, in what other ways can they help you?

*Cynthia*

We have a Facebook page. <https://www.facebook.com/FLGAL18>

People share where I will be in the community so you can stop by and visit. We have brochures which private businesses could display.

Sharing our information is like planting a seed in people's hearts, and they can grow and when it's ready to bloom, they can reach out to us.

*Jen*

I think people view foster care and foster children as kids who are in a home where abuse has taken place, and they are safely removed and placed in a loving home. I think people stop thinking after that because they say, "ok, great! The child's taken care of." But what they don't realize is this child's life now has been turned upside down.

*Mary:* 50:13

There are many times I remember going to court and never speaking to anybody about upcoming court appearances until about 30 minutes before we walked in the court. I would arrive with my foster family or my group home, go into a small room and talk to someone I never spoke to before. This person introduces themselves as my lawyer, but I've never spoke to them before. They're telling me sort of a brief overview of what's about to happen. Then you rush in there, and everybody's talking, but nobody's asking you any questions. Everybody's talking, they're talking over you, and they're talking about you. I remember not agreeing with anything they were saying in there.

For example, it felt like a lot of things were over exaggerated. It was like everybody was trying to nail in a point of how horrible this family is, or this situation is. It often missed the mark on what the reality of what it was, but I didn't have the representation to fight back and say no, none of that's true; that's not what happened.

I think you made a good point. A lot of times people think a child is placed into foster care and that's it, we're done. But that's just the beginning of the journey. This is where the Guardian Ad Litem office comes in. There's a whole new thing starting; are the parents going to do what they need to do to be reunified? Is it not going to happen? Are rights going to be terminated? It's a whole journey ahead. I think we're so important because we make sure the child needs are heard. We provide guidance through the journey. It's not the end, it's the beginning.

*Jen:* 52:00

Thank you so much, ladies, your messages are impactful and your contributions to our community and the children even more so. I thank you so much for everything you do.

*Mary:* 52:12

Thank you for having me today. I really appreciate a chance to talk.

*Jenny James:* 52:16

Yes, thank you for having us. Thank you for letting us talk about what we're passionate and the children that we care about. I just hope everyone listening you will come volunteer with us and I look forward to meeting you soon.

*Cynthia:* 52:30

Thank you for having me. It's always wonderful just to be able to spread the word as to what our program does. Thank you.

*Jen:* 52:37

This is Jen Lee, Creator & Host of I Need Blue podcast, Survivors Talk Surviving www.ineedblue.net