

“Living a Life of Service through Faith”

It was a serendipitous moment for CASA of Essex that Denise Serbay came across an article in her local newspaper announcing an upcoming information session to volunteer for foster youth. She never imagined involving herself with foster care, but that one session changed her mind. Perhaps it was her desire for a more productive use of her time or her mother’s influence, a constant reminder that the civic process meant recognizing that people need someone to speak up on their behalf. She taught her daughter that having faith through difficult circumstances would make all the difference.

To this day, Denise wears several hats in life that pay tribute to all her mother taught her. She has worked as a respiratory therapist for almost twenty years. She is a member of the Junior League of Montclair-Newark, and an associate delegate and Advocacy Chair of the Junior League State Public Affairs Committee. In these roles over the last ten years, Denise has been tasked with educating the community on foster care history, the experience of foster youth, and how organizations such as CASA work towards improving the lives of children in care. In addition to these roles, Denise is also a member of the NJ Coalition Against Human Trafficking, and a Eucharistic Minister at her parish in Bloomfield.

In her role as a CASA, Denise has advocated on ten cases and is currently helping on two simultaneously. She believes it is “hard and heady work,” but she credits her supervisors for being wonderful resources that are both supportive and encouraging. Denise ensures that she can accommodate her advocacy work by “scheduling visits when [she knows she is freshest] and most attentive.” She works closely with her supervisor to plan accordingly during busier times.

Denise finds that her most difficult moments are in first connecting with youth. She finds that asking open-ended questions helps facilitate conversation. She also tries to interject her own life experiences when appropriate to help her youth understand that she can relate to the advice she is giving. Her happiest moment as a CASA came upon the adoption of one of her case children. He hugged her and told her, “I love you for everything you did for me.” In this moment, Denise understood that the youth genuinely appreciate what their CASAs do for them. She feels “it is very important to thank [the youth] for sharing themselves, their experiences, and their time with [CASA volunteers].”

Where many volunteers use CASA of Essex’s extensive pre-service/in-service trainings as tools to help with their cases, Denise found additional value in them. Opening up about her own struggles with her son’s education, Denise was able to use what she had learned during training to advocate more confidently for her own child without feeling intimidated.

Outside of advocacy, Denise lives a full life surrounded by family. She is a twin! Her son is now 26 and she has a three-year-old grandson. She loves reading suspense novels, and Toni Morrison is her go to. Denise enjoys baseball, gardening, and taking walks, but her favorite hobby is traveling to see Rob Thomas/Matchbox 20 concerts!

Denise has made leaps and bounds in her last decade of advocacy, and CASA of Essex is excited to see what the next ten years will hold for her.