

CASA

Of Southwestern Illinois

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"CASA Kid" Is Thriving After Receiving The Help Of His CASA Volunteer And Foster Family

By Bethany Prange, Communications Coordinator, CASA of Southwestern Illinois

He's tall and broad-shouldered, so at first glance, one might wonder if he's going to be intimidating. But then he smiles. He smiles that wide, silly grin that instantly puts others at ease. You just know you're going to like him. Maybe it's his playful demeanor, but Warren Gilmore looks younger than his 33 years. He laughs easily, and speaks eloquently and passionately about music. It's his dream to one day teach music at the high school or college level.

Today, he sits in the offices of CASA of Southwestern Illinois in Belleville. But this is not the first time he has come in contact with the nonprofit.

Two decades ago, Gilmore was a "CASA kid," a child assigned by the courts to work with a Court Appointed Special Advocate. Back then, Gilmore was like any 12-year-old boy, struggling to figure out his place in the world. But for Gilmore, an adopted child who had just been thrown back into the foster care system, the tumultuous teenage years were about to get even more difficult.

"I was in junior high school, at a time when you're trying to find yourself, you're trying to become a man, and your relationship with your parents is really important," Gilmore said. As he faced the uncertainty of his future in the foster care system, Gilmore had one adult he could rely on — Bob, his CASA volunteer.

"There was a CASA worker that was involved and that made things a lot easier," Gilmore said. "The biggest thing was he didn't pressure me to try to tell him about myself. At that time you're dealing with trust issues — he eased me into trusting him."

From ages 3 to 12, Gilmore lived with his adopted parents, who raised him to respect his elders, speak proper English and do well in school. "It took a while to set in that I wasn't at home (with my adopted parents)," Gilmore said. "I would go to sleep and I would forget I wasn't in my old bed. Then I'd wake up screaming."

When he was returned to the foster care system in the seventh grade, Gilmore was sent to a different junior high school in East St. Louis — a poorly-ranked school plagued by drugs, gangs and violence. It has since burned down.

"You have a person who went to a nice elementary school, lived in a nice home, and it was such a change," Gilmore said. "There were drugs in the school, lockers ripped off their hinges, classrooms boarded up."

At his new school, his good grades and manners did not serve him well — they made him a target for bullying by his classmates. "I know for a fact that having a CASA worker really kept me out of trouble because of the things I was around," Gilmore said. "They were always trying to initiate me into a gang. I was never looking for that kind of trouble, but I was trying to find something to be a part of."

Gilmore, who had been in the gifted program at his old school, struggled to keep his grades up. He lived in four different foster homes between seventh and eighth grades. While his foster parents were good, they had several children to focus on. His CASA volunteer, however, could devote his attention to just him.



Warren Gilmore with Donna Lindsey, a longtime CASA employee

"It was good having someone focused solely on you," Gilmore said. "We'd go on walks, talk about things."

By the end of Gilmore's eighth grade year, he landed in his fifth and final foster home. He lived with the Csaszar family in Belleville throughout his high school career, and still considers them his family.

Gilmore attended Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville and Southwestern Illinois College. He earned three associate degrees in music education and performance and fine arts. "My dream is to teach music in high school or teach music theory in college or be a collegiate choir director," Gilmore said. "I want to go back to school eventually."

Right now Gilmore is working and saving money to go back to college. He teaches private vocal and piano lessons and serves as the choir director/minister of music at Trinity United Methodist Church in East St. Louis.

Gilmore credits several people, including the Csaszars and his CASA volunteer, with helping get to where he is today. He encourages everyone in the Metro East to support CASA's mission.

CASA of Southwestern Illinois is a Belleville-based nonprofit that serves Madison, St. Clair and Monroe counties. CASA recruits, trains and supports Court Appointed Special Advocate volunteers to work for the best interest of abused and neglected children. CASAs serve as a voice for these children in juvenile court systems, helping to ensure every child has a safe, loving home. You can make a difference for children like Warren Gilmore by becoming a CASA volunteer or donating to CASA of Southwestern Illinois. Learn more by calling 618-234-4278 or visit www.stclaircasa.com.