

# Volunteers Help Foster Youth Succeed

Howard Petzold, and his wife Norma became volunteer Guardians ad Litem 9 years ago. They are both retired now, Howard from commercial banking and Norma as a stockbroker. Starting from a natural desire to help children, they have found a way to make a difference for young people like Heather.

The Petzolds were appointed to Heather's case when she was 14 years old, and had just entered the foster care system. "My mom was a child of foster care. She really had it rough, and she ended up with foster parents who had abused her along the way. Even though we were taken away from her, she wasn't taught the skills she needed to be a good mother."

Heather remembers the first time she met the Petzolds. "I was at my group home," she says. "I thought, Finally, someone's here to see me! When you're in a group home, you don't really get any special attention. Other kids had people visit, but I didn't. So it was really special when they came to visit. Yay! Someone's visiting me!"

Heather says she could talk to Howard and Norma about anything. "I ranted and raved a lot, but it made me feel better. It was just nice to have somebody there to actually listen to me. A lot of times in the system you don't feel like anybody is in your corner. All these decisions are being made about you, and you don't have a voice. It was nice to have someone sit there and actually listen to what I had to say, and offer advice."

The Petzolds say the best part about being volunteers is the success stories. "When a child is going to accomplish something that will help her grow up to be a responsible adult, that's a success." Heather is currently a junior in college, studying theater. She attributes much of her success to the Petzolds. "When I first met them, I told them I wanted to be a rock star. They didn't say it was a stupid idea, like some people might have done. They said that's cool, and then they encouraged me. They would tell me it might

not happen, but I should try anyway. So when people approached me about doing theater, I was like, I can do this! Instead of a can't do attitude, they helped build a can do attitude."

One of her favorite moments with her GALs was seeing them come to her pageant. "It meant a lot to look out in the crowd and see their faces. The other kids had a mom, or a dad, or both, and it was

nice to have someone there for me. If you're in the system, they are paid staff, they're overworked and they're tired. I've actually been told: it's not in my contract to go watch your pageant."

Heather hopes her story will inspire young people still in the system. Her advice to them is: "Educate yourself. And I'm not talking about just school wise. Children need to learn that they have a voice. They can use that voice. You do have control over what happens in your future. Whether it be that you go to college or make something of yourself, you have the choice to do that. You have to build that future yourself."



*Oconee Volunteer Howard Petzold and former foster youth Heather*