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Protecting the Little Ones

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Office of University
Communications

February 2, 2016

Alumna Coordinates Volunteer Program for Abused/Neglected Children

When Dawn Stover ('01) was in college, she studied criminal justice so she could one day become a police officer. But when life circumstances forced her to reconsider the career she had always dreamed about, she ultimately discovered a position that perfectly suited her skill set and capitalized on her passion for helping kids.

“It was always about children for me, I knew that whatever I did in life was going to have to impact children,” Stover offered. “This is one of the most amazing opportunities that I’ve ever had and I’m very thankful to be in this position.”

Stover, who graduated from the GWU GOAL program in 2001 with a bachelor’s degree in criminal justice, now serves as a program coordinator for the Cleveland County (N.C.) Guardian ad Litem (GAL) program. Initially established in North Carolina in 1983, GAL volunteers serve the best interests of thousands of children in the state who are in protective custody due to abuse or neglect. For more than three decades, the GAL program has taught volunteers how to dig for details, collaborate with other participants, and closely monitor their cases; recommend what’s best for the child through written court reports and testimony; empower the child’s voice; and keep all information confidential.

In Cleveland County, N.C., Stover recruits volunteers and trains them how to effectively advocate for the children in protective custody. Around 50 individuals are sworn in as local GAL volunteers and there can be more than 200 children in protective custody in the county at any given time. Each volunteer commits to at least one case in which they give just eight hours a month to the child/family they have been assigned. Stover believes more volunteers would translate into a higher number of children being impacted in a positive way.

“The time commitment is very minimal, and I will work to give volunteers every skill they need and support them with every breath of my being doing this work,” she shared. “I honestly believe this is the one job that I would do without pay because I get more out of the impact my volunteers make in the lives of these children than I’ve ever gotten from a paycheck. I believe there was a Higher Power who had a hand in where I ended up and I know that I’m doing what I need to do.”

In 1995, Stover was a young student at Gardner-Webb and was pursuing a degree in criminal justice. She spent about a year as a traditional undergraduate student, and then gave birth to a precious little boy. Her new role as a mom resulted in her postponing her studies for a while. When her son got older, she continued to work on her education at Cleveland Community College and then entered the GWU G.O.A.L. (Greater Opportunities for Adult Learners) program. Still inspired by her psychology and sociology classes, she knew that a police officer's schedule would be too unpredictable for her to effectively manage her duties as a single mom. Upon graduation in 2001, she began working at the Cleveland County Department of Social Services within the foster care program. After about four years, she transitioned into her current role as program supervisor for the Guardian ad Litem program.

“I really saw this role as an opportunity to focus on the children,” she recalled. “One hundred percent of the focus in this program is on the child. These are children who may not have ever had somebody to stand up for them and speak for them and just be there for them. “

Stover is now working on her Master of Mental Health Counseling degree at Gardner-Webb, which she believes will offer her additional opportunities to effectively advocate for children. “Just knowing that a child is going to bed safe, that they are going to bed knowing that they have somebody looking out for them,” Stover shared, “that feeling is priceless.”

For more information on the Cleveland County Guardian ad Litem program, or to find out more on how to volunteer, call Dawn at (704) 476-7821. Additional information on the GAL program is available at www.volunteerforgal.org.

Click here to listen to the full interview with Dawn Stover on [SoundCloud.com/wgwgdotorg](https://www.soundcloud.com/wgwgdotorg):