



MACON/BIBB CITIZEN  
ADVOCACY, INC.

# COMMUNITY CURRENTS

SUMMER 2014

## “Friends for Life”

"I want to be in her life for as long as I'm living", says Citizen Advocate Jo Chanin who met Alexia when she was just a small one, age 4.

Eleven years ago Rabbi Aaron Rubinstein of Congregation Sha'arey Israel introduced Jo to Connie Flair, Former Citizen Advocacy Coordinator. The two met, a story was told, and a picture was shown of a beautiful little girl who could benefit from having someone along with her mom in her life. Jo questioned if she could do it. Then decided she could and opened her heart to possibilities for Alexia. Now Jo looks back and smiles and says "It's been an amazing journey for the both of us."

Alexia was born and raised in Macon. She is one of triplets. It was clear to the citizen advocacy office that mom wanted the best for her children, but due to health issues, felt a need for someone else to journey with her along the way. Jo became that someone for Alexia. At that time there was support needed around all three children. An advocate was recruited for each child.

Mom needed the support of the advocates to help her fulfill her dreams of a good education for her children. We know that the school system can be complicated and daunting at times, and the advocates' knowledge of how to navigate the system is key. Because citizen advocacy is a relationship form of protection and advocacy, Jo would read and encourage reading to Alexia. Throughout their relationship Jo would discuss the importance of education, go over school work and discuss ideas. Today Alexia is an accelerated reader.

Jo discovered a brand new world with Alexia. Barnes & Noble became the place to be for them. On weekends they would go to the book-store and spend hours there reading about anything and everything. Cookbooks, books on adventure, magazines, tour guides and books on fashion have been their top choices. Through this love of reading, Alexia is not afraid to try new things and new foods like sushi. She is learning to cook them as well.

Over the years Jo and Alexia have forged a strong bond. Trust.

"She is like my friend, like a sister, I feel fantastic when she's around me," says Alexia who experienced Savannah with Jo for the first time. They have become tourists. They visited the Candy Factory, took a stroll along River Street, enjoyed the river-boat and some fine dining. Since then, they talk about going to Paris. Jo buys things made in France; they look at the weather in Paris. Alexia has made a commitment to complete high school and earn a college degree. She wants to be a marriage and family counselor. As a gift of their friendship and a reward for Alexia's accomplishments, Jo has made a promise to take her to Paris after she graduates from college. These two ladies are preparing for it.

Jo, now married, feels the opportunities for Alexia are endless. She and her husband Steve are doing it together. Alexia was proud to be at their wedding and hear Steve say that she is a part of their family...and they couldn't be there without her. Happiness is their motto. Friends for Life.



Jo Chanin and Alexia Miller

## Common Themes in Citizen Advocacy Relationships

While each Citizen Advocacy story has unique lessons, we can discern overarching themes that teach us about the value of personal commitments between people with and without disabilities, and about the impact of those commitments in people's lives.

**Citizen advocates consistently testify that being an advocate makes them a better person.**

Citizen advocates often say things like, "Becoming a citizen advocate has made me a better person." Advocates have discovered sources of strength to do what needs to be done. Some have recognized their own tendencies to devalue others, and brought their unconscious assumptions to the surface. Advocates have learned to give of themselves more generously.

While being an advocate does not necessarily make people "better," it can make them "gooder." "Better" implies that one is over and above other people. "Gooder" means that one's capacity for goodness has grown. Promoting justice in the face of injustice, or seeking another's good, are good acts in and of themselves, whether or not another person benefits. Human acts not only affect the acted upon, they also affect the actor.

In this light, being good is more essential than doing good. Being good is an internal transformation, a building of a person's character and virtue through striving to be good. To show love to a neighbor is to become more loving. A virtuous act, such as opening one's home to a stranger, or defending a person's life, or encourage someone in despair, engoodens a person's character. Such acts help a person become stronger and create a greater capacity for goodness.

Personal connections with vulnerable people who need support, especially when that support is direct and personal, can "gentle" people. For example, giving someone physical, personal assistance can melt a person's defenses against the closeness such help requires. Citizen advocates have also learned the value of perseverance in the face of many obstacles. Being an advocate has given people an opportunity to live out their values with integrity. Advocates who have taken a strong stand on behalf of a devalued person are forced to examine what they truly believe, test their personal limits, and develop good qualities they never knew they had.

**Citizen advocates often gain deep insight and wisdom about themselves, human nature, and the world we live in.**

Citizen advocates see themselves and the world around them in a different light. Advocates have confronted harsh realities in people's lives. The most important lessons in life are not necessarily those that feel good.

Advocates have confronted the question, "What kind of world do we live in that treats people this way?" A tougher question to ask is, "What kind of person am I to allow such things to happen?" Even more difficult: "Who am I? What do I believe? Who is my neighbor? What must I do?"

Not every advocate is as reflective as these questions suggest. Whether or not those questions are explicitly raised, the lessons of personal engagement in the life of someone who is socially devalued can be transforming. Sometimes the lessons of personal engagement emerge subtly and quietly; sometimes they burst upon one's consciousness in unexpected ways.

Excerpt from Father Adam Hildebrand's book "One Person at a Time"

**Citizen Advocacy:** *“It’s a simple system that somehow works, almost to simple to attract a lot of attention. But it has changed lives. In a society where people are poor, impaired, or powerless are oppressed by systems they haven’t help to create, they need more than a friend. They need someone .... who will walk with them.”*

Tresita Frey, Phoenixville, PA

## Connection & Protection

Citizen Advocacy is built upon the capacity of individuals to care and connect with others in a one-to-one relationship. Advocates are asked to make lifelong voluntary commitments to step in, get to know, and sometimes work extremely hard for and with someone they would not ordinarily meet.

Within each citizen advocacy relationship’s framework of loyalty and commitment, the range of activity varies from an emphasis on practical assistance around basic needs to building a more rich personal life to critical intervention. Advocates and their partners rise to the challenges and take action — together.

A few examples:

- Practical:** access medical and financial support, transportation, jobs or vocational training, help with household tasks like cleaning, shopping or bill paying
- Personal:** enrich social lives, and sometimes offer a first personal friendship, community involvement, including sports or cultural activities or joining a church or club participation in family and holiday celebrations
- Critical Intervention:** helping avoid homelessness, organizing legal representation, becoming guardian

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*“There is no power for change greater than a community discovering what it cares about.”*

Margaret Wheatley



*“There is no safety net that can bear the weight of human indifference, and I have yet to encounter a safety net of laws, rules, regulation and policies that was any stronger than a single concerned and engaged person, standing shoulder to shoulder with a person, navigating the daily challenges of life in the community.”*

Charles Sundram, Attorney

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**An Invitation to Action**

Citizen Advocacy is an opportunity to stand by, for and with another person, taking action to ensure a better life and an enrichment of opportunity for a person who may, because they have a disability, have been subject to isolation and segregation, rejection and abuse, poverty and injustice.

**CITIZEN ADVOCACY**

A Valued Citizen, unpaid and independent of human services, creates a relationship with a person who has a developmental disability and is at risk of social exclusion.

The citizen advocate represents and responds to that person's interests, and brings the gifts and concerns of the person into circles of ordinary community life.

Donate online at:  
maconbibbcitizenadvocacy.org  
or by mail to:  
Macon/Bibb Citizen Advocacy  
613 Cherry Street  
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We welcome and depend on your support!

**Thank You**

Citizen Advocacy is a community-strengthening endeavor that depends on the support of local citizens. All investments directly benefit the Macon/Bibb County community. Our thanks to these folks who have invested from January 2013 through May 2014.

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