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Helping Jayden Find Family

THEY THOUGHT THEY WERE just going to see a baseball game. But when six-year-old Jayden and his newly adoptive mother, Shellie, arrived at the minor-league Kane County Cougars' ballpark in Geneva, Illinois over Labor Day weekend, they realized something was up.

"Welcome to our family, Jayden! Congratulations!" read the banner on one wall of the luxury box. A loop of photos of Jayden played against another wall. A table in the middle of the room overflowed with presents.

You see, Shellie's adoption of Jayden (a journey that began years before in Los Angeles) had just been finalized. It was official and family and friends turned out for the big surprise in force. The size of the party spoke to the excitement that had been building since Jayden and Shellie met. More than 50 family members and friends were in attendance. So was Jan Miller, Jayden's Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA), who flew in from Los Angeles as a surprise guest.

CASA of Los Angeles improves the lives of children in the dependency system by pairing them with trained volunteer advocates. CASA seeks to reduce and reverse the effects of child abuse and neglect. Nowhere in the

nation is the problem greater than in Los Angeles County, where 30,000 children who have been abused or neglected are under the jurisdiction of the Dependency Court.

Jayden and Shellie met years before, following Shellie's inquiry about adoption with an online adoption registry. Then 4-year-old Jayden was living in a group home for medically fragile children. He had a rough start to life, having suffered life-threatening



injuries—cervical/spinal-cord damage, compression fractures to two vertebrae, and upper extremity deformity—as a result of extreme physical abuse. When Shellie met him, he was a quadriplegic but was becoming more verbal, could sit with support, and was learning to use his legs.

"I introduced myself as a friend," Shellie remembers. "I told him I brought a friend with me. It was a teddy bear.

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We played together for a while and then I left for the day. When I went back the next day, he had that teddy bear with him, and he started talking about how friends can't leave friends alone. It broke my heart."

Shellie flew back to Chicago that evening convinced they were a good fit. She eagerly contacted the adoptions worker and stated her desire to adopt him. That weekend, she met Jan, Jayden's CASA, who

had been working with the boy since July of that year.

"My role in the beginning was to connect with him, to be a part of his life as much as I could be," Jan explains. "He had no family in his life, and I would visit him at school and his group home, and attend his doctor's appointments and physical therapy appointments. I would take pictures and videos of him to share with

Shellie, the court, and his social workers."

Meanwhile, Jan was working with others on the case to get Jayden the equipment he would need for his life outside of the medical home, including a portable gastronomy tube—he wasn't able to eat on his own at the time—and a gait trainer, to allow him to stand upright and walk within a harness so he could develop strength in his legs.

About the VCLF

The Valley Community Legal Foundation is the charitable arm of the San Fernando Valley Bar Association. The Foundation's mission is to support the legal needs of the youth, victims of domestic violence, and veterans of the San Fernando Valley. The Foundation also provides educational grants to qualified students pursuing legal careers. The Foundation relies on donations to fund its work. Please visit thevclf.org to donate.

By June 2013, everything was finally in place for Jayden to live with Shellie. She flew back out to Los Angeles to pick him up, allowing a day for a trip to Disneyland before the flight back. Jayden, however, couldn't wait to get to Chicago. He desperately wanted to leave his old life behind.

For the first few months, life in Chicago was full of ups and downs. Jayden was so insecure that Shellie literally couldn't leave his side. If

she just went to the restroom, she would have to talk to him through the door. Jan continued as his CASA. She visited him in his new home in September of 2013, talked to him by Skype at least once a month, talked to Shellie even more often, and participated in school and therapeutic conferences by speakerphone.

Still, Jayden talked constantly about his adoption. It was clear that he wouldn't be truly at ease until it


was finalized, although he dreaded having to go back to California for the hearing. He refused to answer questions about his life in California and would speak of no one he knew there—except for Jan, whom he began calling Grandma Jan. He got a nice surprise in August, when the judge agreed to conduct the final adoption hearing from Los Angeles via Skype.

"Mom, I'm adopted now, so I don't have to go back to California," he said afterward. "We're a family now. You're my mom and I'm your son and that's it. It's all done."

"You're right. It's all [done]," Shellie told him.

With that, the last of his insecurity about his family melted away. Now Jayden talks instead about school, cars, food (he's eating on his own), and—his favorite activity—buddy baseball, in which an able-bodied boy hits the ball for him and he runs the bases in his wheelchair. His prognosis is still in many ways uncertain and he often asks whether eventually he will be able to drive a car or walk on his own, but he has a poise about it all, that can only be described as precocious.

"I may not be able to do everything other kids can do," he says, "but I can do them my way."

"There are a lot of Jaydens in the San Fernando Valley, too many," tells Laurence N. Kaldor, president of the VCLF. "Support of the Bar and the VCLF are very concrete ways an attorney, a judge, or a business person can make a real difference. Whether it's an individual or a firm or corporation, your donation to the VCLF will let us help the next Jayden find a new family." 

CASA is supported by the generous contributions of individuals, companies, and organizations. The VCLF is proud to support CASA and amazing people like Jayden, Shellie and Jan Miller.

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Valley Community Legal Foundation to Hold First Ever Virtual Gala

By D. Shawn Burkley

THE CHARITABLE FOUNDATION of the SFVBA—the Valley Community Legal Foundation—will be holding its first ever virtual gala this year from May until the end of July. The initiative is the first of its kind for the group, which has been studying ways to increase the percentage of each donation that can be allocated to the Foundation's many charitable projects.

"When all is said and done, the Virtual Gala could result in more than 90% of the money raised going directly to the causes that we all care about. This is not always the case with traditional events, which incur much higher overhead costs," says Foundation President Laurence Kaldor.

In other words, by holding most of the traditional fundraising activities online, more revenue can be allocated directly to help the legal needs of the San Fernando Valley's youth, veterans, victims of domestic violence, and our Valley's most socioeconomically challenged with programs like family law mediation and Blanket the Homeless.

The Concept

But what is a virtual gala and how is it different from a traditional event? Well, first there is no physical event that requires attendance. Hence, the Virtual Gala's tagline, *No Jacket Required*.

All of the elements of a traditional gala will remain in place, including

tickets, an honoree, opportunities for sponsorship, and a donor-based auction. The Foundation will be selling virtual tickets, which will include information about the honoree, a raffle entry, instructions regarding the auction (which will be, of course, online), and be accompanied by a few fun items for a nominal sum. Because the tickets will be priced to sell, participants are encouraged to purchase as many tickets as their budget will allow.

Importantly, the Gala will have for its honoree retiring Judge Michelle Rosenblatt. "Her honor served in a variety of key roles for the Foundation, and the Gala is our opportunity to show our appreciation," says Kaldor.

Participants are also welcome to honor the estimable Judge Rosenblatt through tributes and testimonials which are being offered through the Foundation, and will be printed in the July issue of *Valley Lawyer*.


Sponsorship of the Gala is also being offered by the Foundation at a variety of levels. Name sponsors, for example, will have the opportunity to be associated with all aspects of the Gala, including a presence in *Valley Lawyer* and the *Metropolitan News*, as well as online. More information regarding sponsorships can be obtained by emailing info@theVCLF.org.

An online auction, always one of the most popular aspects of a traditional

gala, will be held between July 8 and July 22. Auction items are donated by Board members, supporters and members of the SFVBA. All revenue from the sales will go directly to Foundation programs. Items continue to be added but currently include tickets to the American Music Awards, VIP luxury box tickets to see Carrie Underwood, jewelry, sports and movie memorabilia, vintage wine, and much more... with items being added weekly. The auction site can be found at <http://bit.ly/1TaY4wD>.¹

The Opportunity

So how can you make the Virtual Gala a success? Simple. Buy tickets. Become a sponsor. Donate items for the online auction and bid on others. In the coming weeks, emails will be going out to the legal community providing information on how to do all of these things. If you would like to be sure that you receive these emails, please provide your email to info@theVCLF.org and the Foundation will be glad to include you on their list.

The Foundation is depending on people like you to make this, the first ever Virtual Gala, a 21st century success. 

¹ Full URL: <https://www.biddingforgood.com/auction/auctionhome.action?auctionId=258704318>

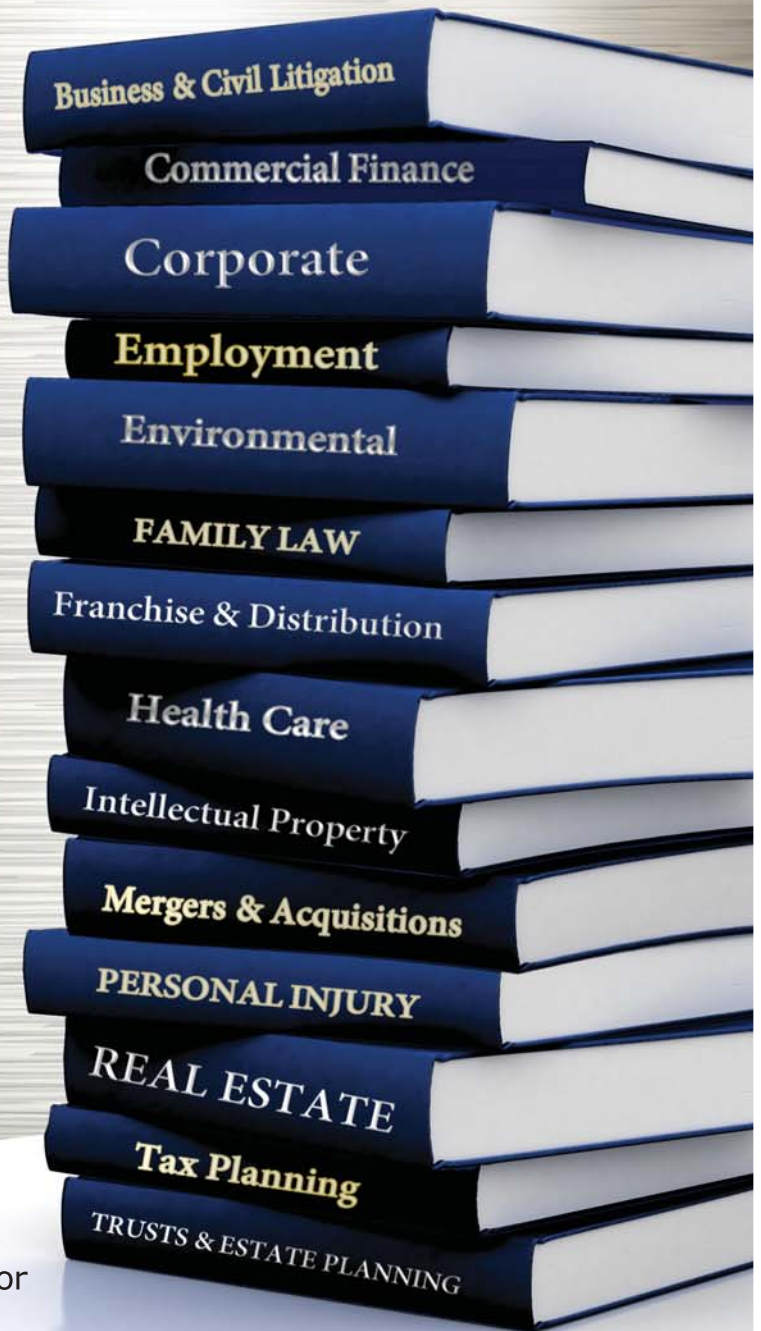
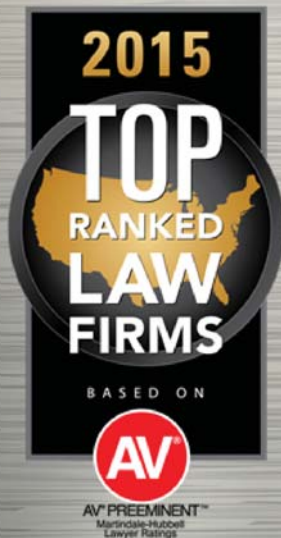
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