

A portrait of Judy Stewart McMurry, an elderly woman with short, wavy, light-colored hair. She is smiling broadly, showing her teeth. She is wearing a bright green, textured jacket with a circular pattern over a black top. The background is a wooden wall with a flag partially visible on the left.

Snapshot:
Judy Stewart McMurry

Early life: Born and raised in Madison; graduated from Butler High School 1964.

Career: 20 years as an administrative officer at Redstone Arsenal; now an active farmer.

Family: In 1977 married Jerry, her second husband, a 1954 graduate of Marshall County High School, who grew up in Guntersville. Daughter Cynthia Porter lives in Huntsville with Judy's grandchildren Cody, 13, and Cole, 9. Jerry's son, Russ, and his wife, Lisa, live in Athens; grandson Colin, 25.

Other activities: 4-H volunteer; Master Gardener since 2012; member of the Lake Guntersville Rowing Club; active member of Diamond United Methodist Church.

Judy McMurry

Good People

Child abuse is an ugly reality, but she shows you can do something about it

5 questions

Story and photo by
David Moore

Here's an ugly fact. Marshall County has the 2nd highest rate of child abuse and neglect in Alabama. That amounts to a lot of pain and misery, a lot of youngsters far outside the warm circles of a good life. And all too often abusive parents raise children who grow into abusive parents themselves.

Here's a bright fact. You can actually do something about it. You can help break the cycle of abuse.

Maybe Judy McMurry can help convince you.

In some aspects Judy leads a bucolic life. After a 20-year career at Redstone Arsenal, she's now an active farmer.

She lives in a 98-year-old house off Warrenton Road she and her late husband, Jerry, restored. She has a 100-acre farm located on Point of Pines where her 65 cows graze. Her dogs, goats and horses are there.

Judy shares the cotton, beans and corn another farmer grows on 65 acres in Madison that she inherited from her grandfather.

Other aspects of Judy's life are less sunny. Her first husband was killed in an accident. Jerry, to whom she was married 32 years, died in 2009 after a three-year battle with cancer.

Through good times and bad, children – OK, animals, too – have always been close to her heart. She's always had, and even created, ways to interact with them.

When her daughter Cynthia was a teen, she and Jerry did oval track racing. Judy was part of it. "I was a race mom and a race wife," she grins.

She followed Russ's son, Colin from T-Ball to pitching for UAB for two years. Today, Cynthia's kids bring Judy to the ballpark. They also are growing 300 Christmas trees on her Madison farm.

In Marshall County, Judy is a 4-H volunteer involved in the kids' goat shows. She also picks up neighborhood kids on Wednesday evenings and takes them to supper and worship at Diamond United Methodist Church.

Perhaps her biggest involvement with kids, however, relates directly to the problem of child abuse. Judy is a volunteer for CAJA of Marshall County, a Court Appointed Juvenile Advocate.

When a child is pulled into court because he or she is a victim of abuse or neglect, or is maybe stuck in the no-win middle of nasty custody cases, a judge appoints Judy or one of the other 10 CAJA volunteers to represent the best interests of that child during legal proceedings.

The parent or parents have attorneys. And in most cases the judge appoints an attorney as guardian ad litem to look out for the minor's best legal interest.

"Judges assign CAJA volunteers to cases where they don't have a clear view of what is going on," Judy says. "A lot of times they look at a case and it's black and white, but when a case is in the gray area, when this parent is saying this and that one saying that, that's when CAJA is called to investigate.

"A CAJA is the child's voice in court," she adds. "We are always out for the best interest of that child."

And it's always in a child's best interest to be placed in a safe and permanent home in order to help prevent future abuse and neglect. That's how you break the cycle.

Growing numbers of drug cases hamper the entire legal system; likewise for CAJAs. Judy and the others work on, making a difference in the lives of the children they work with. But, she says, they sure could use some help ...

1. *So how did you and Jerry get involved in CAJA?*

Jerry had worked with U. S. Army

Missile Command at Redstone Arsenal for 42 years and was thinking about retirement. I told him he'd want to find something in the community that interested him and get involved as a volunteer.

We saw articles about CAJA in the paper. We'd always been involved with children, with sports with our kids. And he had been involved in the Jaycees before. And our son Russ is an attorney, so the legal side of CAJA was interesting, too.

It just all fit. It involved children and the court system. So we signed up for the training.

We had no clue what we were getting into. I don't think anyone who gets involved in CAJA comes in realizing the magnitude of what children have to live in or go through in their lives.

2. *Can you describe a sampling of home situations you've found children living in when you came to help?*

We've had cases where you go into a home and children are eating out of garbage cans because they didn't have food. And I guarantee you the parents would be sitting there holding a cigarette.

Some homes we go in are filthy and have bugs. Then again, we have been to houses we probably could never afford to live in. Child abuse and neglect range from one demographic extreme to the other.

We volunteer 24-7. You find out a lot when you knock on someone's door at 7 a.m. Sunday and see what happened there Saturday night.

Do people always like to see us come? No. Are they always truthful? No. But that's what we are there to find out, the truth. We can get a court order and investigate all aspects of the case.

All of our cases are fact-based. We are there to gather facts.

You have degrees of cases, but they are never pretty. Some are not that bad, but some are horrendous.

3. *Emotionally and time-wise, how much of a commitment does it require of someone to be a CAJA?*

The initial training is 30 hours. They usually try to cover it in a couple of weeks. Also, we are required to have 12 hours a year of in-service time, continuing training to keep up with laws and services.

The national average for time on a case is 30 to 40 hours depending on its severity. I have had cases open months and cases open years. You know how the court system can be.

After a case, we try to keep in contact with most of the children. With some of them you get emotionally involved. You might pick up the phone every day or two to find out what is going on in their life, to ensure the parents are doing what they need to do.

For a lot of these children it's the first time someone has ever cared about them.

With the younger kids it's pretty

Become a CAJA

"I have the best volunteers," says Marshall County CAJA executive director Sherry Willis. "They have always stepped up when asked to be an advocate for the abused and neglected children of Marshall County. Every child deserves to have a voice in court."

Volunteers are: Wanda Parker, Peggy Shell, Wanda Teal and Rhonda Walker of Albertville; Pamela Bodine, Flemming Grove, Rhonda Likos, Judy McMurry and Dr. John Packard of Guntersville; Susan Beck and Sherry Willis of Union Grove.

If anyone is interested in joining, Sherry will set up training for late fall. Call: 256-582-3787.

easy to form a relationship. With teenagers it's harder. Imagine a kid who has been abused all his life. You

step in and try to have rapport with that teenager. I don't know how many times I've been cussed. You try to keep your emotions in check and not take things personally.

A lot of these kids fall into the cracks. No one knows about it until they get in the court system. It's sad. One child asked me, "Where were you when I was growing up and living in the back of a car and on the streets?"

Some kids get into drugs. Some end up in juvenile court. It's sad that there are not more facilities for kids with drug problems.

If we had more volunteers it would be so much easier because we would not have to take on so many cases. But no cases are forced on you. They're all volunteer.

4. *What do you get out of being a CAJA volunteer, out of your investment of time and emotions in these children?*

There is not any price you can put on just knowing you have helped a child. When you look at what these kids come out of and see them become productive

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people, it's rewarding. It's rewarding to see that maybe something you said or did for the child has helped break the cycle.

I don't know ... I always get this feeling that I never do enough for a child. That's the hard part of it. As a CAJA I can't force my standard of living on each case. I'd like to take all of these kids and put them at my standards, but I have to look at their life and where they are. It's not what I want for them.

The houses you go in ... You would like to make them look like your house, but they are their houses. You just try to make that better.

A lot of cases are not so much about abuse as circumstances. Some people get into situations because they don't know services are there for them. Sometimes you can help a family with services and make a lot of difference in that child's life.

For instance, you might help them get housing. We can guide people in directions they need to go for certain services: DHR, HUD, The Home Place ... there are a multitude of agencies here.

There was a girl years ago that Jerry

and I had worked with. She had been pushed off on other family members 25 times. She had been traded for drugs, abused in a few of these places.

She went to a girls ranch. Jerry and I became her resource parents, something stable in her life. She is married now with children. They are not where I would like them to be, but they are doing OK. What she'd like is to hear her parents say they love her and really mean it.

We become so comfortable in our own lives that we forget these children are out there. They just need someone to step up and speak for them, someone to care.

People think they can't possibly do this. They can't picture themselves doing it. But you really can. Anyone can, if you just give up a little bit of time.

I think everybody needs to step up in some form. Everybody can do a little bit.

There are times I don't get my house cleaned because I have a CAJA case. But if everybody gave just a little bit of time, it would make these children's lives better. And, like I said, you can't put any price on knowing you did that.

5. Many people may know you as a CAJA and as a Master Gardener. Will you share something about yourself that most people don't know?

I have a lot of varied interests, and animals have always been a part of my life. My grandfather gave me a cow the day I was born. I have never been without a cow. It's part of my life.

I love animals. I have seven horses. Six of them were abandoned or rescued.

I've also rescued and raised many kinds of dogs. I used to raise registered Dobermans and sell puppies. Now I just rescue them.

When you rescue dogs, it's almost like they feel indebted to you, like they know they now have a good home. They appreciate it.

Dobermans have a bad name of being fierce, but once you put them in a good loving home ... I never had one that stayed that way after I rescued it. Rescuing them breaks the cycle.

That's what CAJAs do - break the cycle.

Good Life Magazine



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