**2014 California's Volunteer of the Year Award Winner – Gail Nebenzahl**

Gail Nebenzahl recently completed her service as a board member of SFCASA (San Francisco Court Appointed Special Advocates), after serving as a volunteer CASA. Since 2000, when Gail completed her 40 hours of training and was sworn in by a judge as a CASA, no one has worked more tirelessly to support the healthy development of children in foster care in San Francisco.

Gail took on the role of advocate for three siblings, mentoring and advocating for their rights while helping them navigate difficult challenges. Gail would pick up the children weekly, assist with homework and take them on outings: playgrounds, stow lake, California Academy of Sciences, Angel Island, Muir Woods. They explored the many kinds of foods of the Bay Area.

Gail went the extra mile, uncovering resources to ensure they had what they needed, such as a photography class for one and singing lessons for another. One of the siblings, Maria was in foster care for the second time for severe neglect by her mother, now incarcerated. During the first six months Maria was in three foster homes. Gail found her first foster home to be frightening. In the second home, at only seven years old, Maria was made the housekeeper. Though the child qualified for tutoring and therapy, this foster mother did not allow it. Gail fought for a better placement, finding a responsible family with whom Maria has now been living for ten years, in a guardianship.

Gail knew Maria also deserved to have the best education and sought support so Maria could attend a K-8 Catholic school on full scholarship. Maria had missed going to church and it was the only place she had felt safe and enjoyed the community of people. From a Catholic family, she wanted to be baptized and Gail arranged for her to meet the priest. Maria chose her beloved second grade teacher to be her baptismal mother and the priest became her baptismal father. Maria now had a COMMUNITY of support that she could not have created on her own.

In 2004, Gail joined the Board of Directors. A fearless fundraiser, Gail introduced dozens of community members to SFCASA. Knowing there were more foster youth to be served, she launched the SFCASA Guild to raise financial support and visibility. She recruited the first Guild Chair and together they created the precursor to our annual Fostering Change Gala fundraiser. They held house parties and events to raise money and awareness. She solicited hundreds of auction items walking local neighborhoods, sharing the SFCASA mission.

A fourth generation San Franciscan, Gail holds a Bachelor of Science from the University of California, San Francisco and earned her Masters of Arts in Anthropology from San Francisco State University at age 60. While raising three children with her husband Bernard, Gail worked as a dental hygienist for 29 years, was active in the integration of public schools, and marched in Civil Rights rallies. She has served on the Board of Cross Cultural Family Center, Jewish Family and Children's Services, and Women's Interfaith Dialogue on the Mideast.