

Vista

Qué
regalarle a
mamá
en su día

La madre
soltera y
sus finanzas

Los secretos de
Rosa Mexicano

MOTHER
OF THE YEAR

Clara
Rojas





For the Love of Children

BY ANALISA NAZARENO

During the month of May, CBS "Cold Case" star Danny Pino is encouraging Latinos – and other people who care about children – to become "super heroes" for abused and neglected children by becoming volunteer advocates for children in foster care.

Pino is the national spokesman for Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA), which along with 16 other organizations is honoring May as Foster Care Awareness Month. "You give them strength. You give them a voice," Pino said. "You might be the only person who will make a difference in that child's life."

Children in the foster care system stay an average of 28 months and may see several

social workers and foster parents coming in and out of their lives. A judge appoints a CASA volunteer to stay with the child through the protective services process to speak on the child's behalf.

A child with a volunteer advocate is less likely to go back into the foster care system because the volunteer helps judges and social workers find permanent homes where children can thrive, Pino said.

"Once that child's life is being steered into a more productive, positive place, what you've essentially done is not only changed that child's life," he said. "If that child has a child, you're talking about generations. And when you multiply that by 500,000, we're

More than 500,000 children are currently in foster care, and there are not enough families to provide homes for them. May is Foster Care Awareness Month.

steering the nation for generations to come."

Pino became involved with CASA two years ago when his cousin, a volunteer in Miami who is now a board member for the national organization, invited him to learn more about the foster care system and get involved. "My wife was pregnant at the time when my cousin reached out to me and it became something very visceral," said Pino, the father of two toddler boys. "When you become a parent, you see the innocence of a child. You see it every day as a reminder of how vulnerable all children are."

During Foster Care Awareness Month, the National Foster Care Coalition, which includes CASA and Casey Family Programs,

“You might be the only person who will make a difference in that child’s LIFE.”

holds special events to raise awareness of the needs of children in foster care. The needs are many and include adoption, foster care homes, advocacy, scholarships, monetary support, and better-funded state child protective systems.

Particularly acute is the need for foster homes. There are approximately 153,000 licensed foster homes available for the 513,000 children in care, according to Ray Torres, Vice President of the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

“When there are not enough foster homes, we end up placing more children in individual foster homes than recommended or what is ideal,” Torres said. “National Foster Care Awareness Month becomes important (because) we do not have an adequate supply of foster homes. And we need to make a more concerted effort to let the community get involved and let them know what types of support there are for foster parents.”

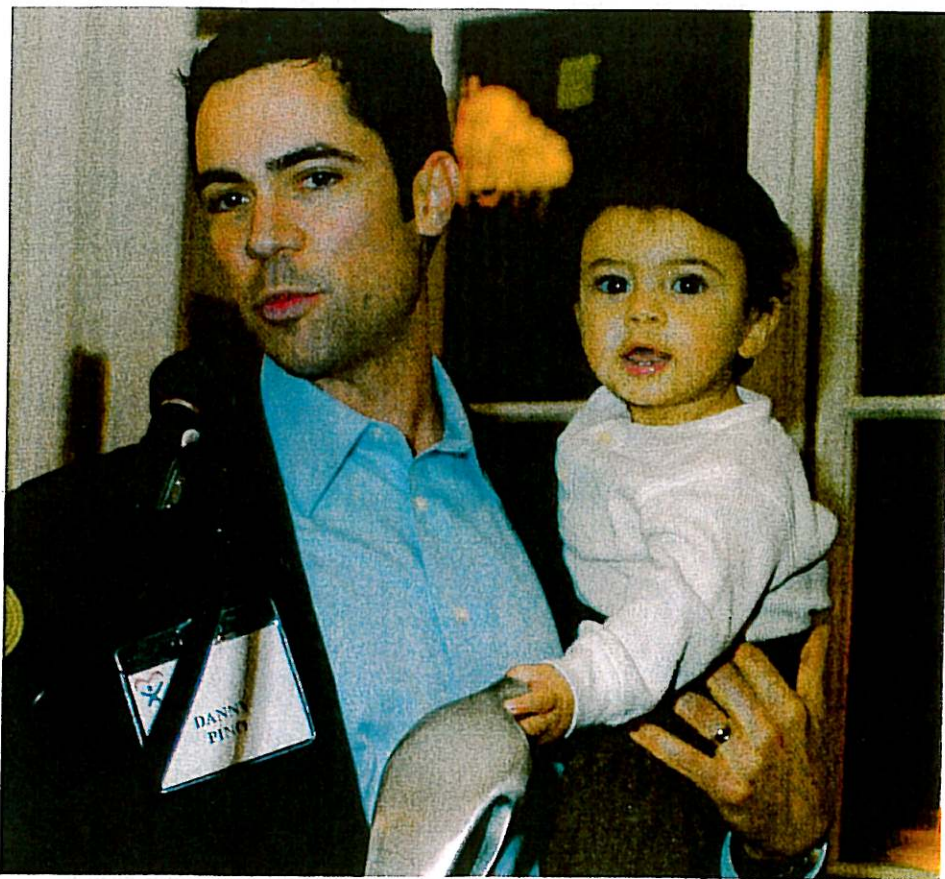
Torres said many caring people are not aware that states provide financial assistance and medical care for people who decide to become foster parents.

“We want to attract ordinary citizens from all walks of life,” he said.

The need for Latino and African American foster homes is particularly critical, Torres said. African American children make up 32 percent of the foster care system while African Americans make up 15 percent of the general population. Latinos make up 18 percent of children in care, while they compose 17 percent of the general population.

And while statistics on the ethnicity of foster care parents are not available, roughly half of African American and Latino children get placed within homes where the foster parents are not of the same ethnic background, Torres said.

Experts say in addition to having been abused or neglected by their parents, Latino and African American children in foster care also often experience cultural alienation when they are placed in homes outside of their cul-



Danny Pino, spokesman for the rights of foster children and board member of CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocates), urges Latinos to get involved by becoming foster parents.

tures and communities. Latino children may also face language barriers.

“Ideally, foster care should be neighborhood-based, to make sure children remain connected to their families, the culture and the institutions that are familiar to them,” Torres said.

In decades past, English-language requirements prevented many Latinos from participating. Many states have since eased that requirement, allowing for Spanish-only parents to get involved, as long as one person in the household is able to speak English.

Just as Latino foster parents are in sharp need, so are Latino volunteers advocating

for children, Pino said. Spanish-speaking volunteers, in particular, serve as bridges for families facing a system where social workers, judges and attorneys are likely to speak English only. Within CASA, there are only 5,000 Latino volunteers nationwide available for the approximately 94,000 Latino children in foster care.

“I’m not great at math,” said Pino, who has a master in fine arts degree from New York University. “But you don’t have to be to realize that there is a huge disparity.”

To learn more about Foster Care Awareness Month, go to www.fostercaremonth.org.

Foster Care By Numbers

700,000: Number of children who spend time each year in foster care

513,000: Number of children currently in child protective custody

153,000: Number of foster homes

94,000: Number of Latino children in foster care

20,000: Number of children who “age out” of foster care each year without adoption or reunification with parents

54 percent: Percent of children who have aged-out and earned a high school diploma

25 percent: Percent of children who have aged-out and become homeless

Source: Casey Family Services, National Foster Care Month Partnership