

CASA CONNECT



TEAM CAROLINE A DAD'S PERSPECTIVE

BY JOHN, FOSTER AND ADOPTIVE FATHER

We'd like to share a true story of hope about a group of people whose lives were impacted by CASA:

- Laura, Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA)
- Caroline, teenager in foster care*
- John and Katy, foster and adoptive parents*

Here's a bit of our story. For starters, we never would've had a chance to be Caroline's parents without Laura. Laura was dedicated to ensuring our foster child had everything she needed. When she learned Caroline was unsafe in her prior placement, she used her unique role as a CASA to protect Caroline. After Laura informed the judge, the caseworker, and the guardian ad litem, Caroline came to our home.

Once Caroline was in our care, Laura became an invaluable resource. She spent a few hours with Caroline every week—getting boba tea, doing volunteer work, and generally just bonding and building trust. This was an incredibly valuable bit of stability for a girl whose whole life had turned upside down.

Laura didn't only advocate for Caroline—she also supported my wife Katy and me. Whenever we faced challenges, Laura helped address them so we could continue providing a loving home for Caroline.

When we couldn't reach people on Caroline's team, Laura always answered the phone. Sometimes we were stressed and just needed to talk, and Laura was always there to listen.

Sometimes Laura saw we were overwhelmed with everything: court hearings, police contacts, school, therapy, and on and on, and she offered to take something off our plate. Other times, she took Caroline out so Katy and I had time to complete important tasks.

Laura's support made our lives easier, but it also allowed us to be the caregivers Caroline needs. We were all on "Team Caroline" together, so we made better decisions, which helped make Caroline a happier teen.

On July 7, 2023, Katy and I became Caroline's parents. Our adoption day was joyful, and Laura made it extra special. She brought cookies, flowers, signs, and a special scrapbook to the courthouse to celebrate our growing family.

We are so thankful for having a CASA volunteer to support Caroline, Katy, and me. Laura has truly been a godsend and has helped change three lives for the better.

Katy and I are not only forever on "Team Caroline" but also on "Team Laura" and "Team CASA." Thank you all for the wonderful and important work you do.



Scan the QR code or visit
casakentco.org/casa-story-laura-caroline/
to read more about Caroline's story.

A NOTE FROM EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR STEPHANIE SHELER

Three of my favorite people in the world are my nephews: Finnegan, Milo, and Oscar. I frequently spend one-on-one time with them, and a few weeks ago, it was 8-year-old Milo's turn. He came over on a Saturday afternoon to bake a chocolate cake and play games.

Milo is a talker, so our conversations are always lively. As we baked, we bantered back and forth about school and friends. He loves math, so he was calculating how much older I am than his mom, my youngest sister. "You're almost a senior!" he said to me. I guess he looks at age differently than I do.

During game time, I told Milo I had been thinking a lot about hope because of my job at CASA. I asked him, "What do you think gives children hope?"

Without batting an eye, he answered, "Their parents."

He's right. Most children feel hopeful because of the care and love their parents give them. They know they're safe and that their needs will be met.

But what happens when parents struggle because of trauma in their past or present, and they abuse or neglect their children? **That's when CASA of Kent County can step in to offer hope—not only to the children—but also to their families.**

This season, we are asking you to "Be Their Hope" by donating, volunteering, or spreading the word about CASA's mission of advocacy. With your support, more children will receive the individualized advocacy that only a CASA volunteer can provide.

As we wrap up this calendar year, I wish each of you hope during the coming holiday season. **Thank you for your enduring commitment to help provide the same warm feeling for children in our community.**



Milo & Stephanie

THE FACES OF CASA: WELCOME, NEW BOARD MEMBERS!

CASA of Kent County has welcomed some new faces to the board of directors this year, and we'd like to introduce them!

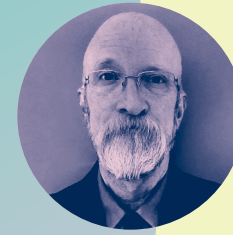


CLAIRE GUISFREDI
NORTH KENT CONNECT,
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Originally from Ohio, Claire moved to West Michigan 11 years ago, taking the position of executive director of North Kent Connect. In her role, Claire is responsible for driving the vision, building relationships, honing the organizational culture, and implementing the strategic plan.

As a former teacher, Claire knows the challenges abused and neglected children face, and how one person can change a child's life. When she heard Stephanie speak at a Heart of West Michigan United Way meeting, Claire thought her skill set might be a good fit for CASA.

An avid hiker, cross-country skier, cyclist, and pickleball enthusiast, Claire loves exploring the trails and natural areas in the beautiful state of Michigan. Claire and her family also enjoy playing board and card games.



BILL HOLMES
DISABILITY ADVOCATES
OF KENT COUNTY,
ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR

Bill joined Disability Advocates of Kent County as the associate director in 2018, following a 25-year social work career. Bill's experience includes supervising programs and services for adults, children and families, and people with disabilities.

Bill's first job in Michigan was in foster care as a case worker. During this time, he was introduced to CASA and saw firsthand the impact volunteers make as the voices for abused and neglected children.

Originally from Maryland, Bill earned a bachelor's degree in sociology and anthropology from St. Mary's College of Maryland and later completed his Master of Social Work from Grand Valley State University. Bill and his wife have two children and live in Grand Rapids. The family enjoys concerts, plays, sporting events, and outdoor activities.



TARA KIELY
HR COLLABORATIVE,
CLIENT SOLUTIONS
SPECIALIST

Tara is the lead client solutions strategist for HR Collaborative and has worked there in various roles since 2018. Tara has dedicated her 20+ years of professional experience to working with business leaders to elevate their people strategy and operations, and specializing in HR functional and strategy design, people and project development, and employee relations.

Tara received her bachelor's degree in management with an emphasis on human resources from Grand Valley State University. Tara is a certified Professional in Human Resources (PHR) and a Society for Human Resources Management Certified Professional (SHRM-CP).

Tara grew up in Lansing, Michigan, and lives in Grand Rapids with her husband and two children. She joined the board after learning about CASA through a coworker. CASA's commitment to advocate for abused and neglected children by being a voice in court resonates with Tara's desire to contribute to—and impact—the community.



KATHERINE MULLEN
FORMER CASA
VOLUNTEER

Katherine is a former CASA volunteer and is passionate about helping children. She has been involved with many child-focused organizations throughout the years and has served her local community through a wide variety of volunteer roles. Katherine will serve as Endowment Committee chair and looks forward to helping the board guide CASA in its pursuit to be of greater service to the children of Kent County.

Katherine holds a Master of Business Administration degree with a marketing concentration and has managed two businesses, one of which she and her husband co-owned until selling it in 2020. Katherine is working to become an MSU Extension Master Gardener. She also studied at the Chicago Botanic Garden for three years, becoming a Certified Landscape Designer.

Katherine and her husband spend as much time as possible with their four children, five grandkids, and spoiled charcoal Lab. She has also been an active CrossFitter for the past 10 years.



AMANDA WITTE
KENT SCHOOL SERVICES
NETWORK,
TEAM LEAD

Amanda is a team lead for Kent School Services Network (KSSN), where she has worked since 2018. She passionately supports her reporting team members in schools throughout Kent County who connect students to resources, empower families, and transform schools and communities. In 2022, Amanda was selected to participate in the Grand Rapids Chamber's Emerging Leaders Program.

Originally from the east side of Michigan, Amanda has been a resident of Grand Rapids since attending Grand Valley State University (GVSU) in 2005. She later returned to GVSU to earn her Master of Social Work. Amanda was introduced to CASA while working as a licensing specialist at a foster care agency. She quickly recognized the positive impact a CASA volunteer can have on a case through relationship building.

Amanda is proud of the way Grand Rapids continues to grow and evolve to be a more welcoming place. She enjoys taking advantage of the many local festivals and activities with her husband, friends, and family. She is enthusiastic about how her work with CASA serves as an avenue for positive change in the community.

OUTCOMES UPDATE

July 1 – Sept. 30, 2023

Our shared mission to provide a voice for children who have experienced abuse and neglect continues. We use outcomes to measure our progress.

Thank you to our generous donors and committed volunteers for supporting this work.

34 REQUESTS FOR A CASA VOLUNTEER
97 CHILDREN SERVED
88 ACTIVE VOLUNTEERS

54 COURT REPORTS WRITTEN
11 NEWLY TRAINED VOLUNTEERS
12 CHILDREN ACHIEVED PERMANENCY

NEW! VOLUNTEER RECRUITMENT MIXERS

After a successful men's recruitment event earlier in 2023, CASA of Kent County staff realized an important truth: nothing helps break the ice like a slice of pizza!

Recruiting CASA volunteers is a tough business. Being a court appointed special advocate requires a level of dedication that's unique from many other volunteer opportunities. Often, new CASA volunteers report that they heard of CASA many years prior but took their time deciding when the opportunity was right for them. Both anecdotally and based on historical program data, CASA of Kent County staff members know that a word-of-mouth invitation is one of the most effective methods to find volunteers. And what could possibly be a better way to enhance the word-of-mouth recruitment experience than by serving pizza?

These mixer events bring together interested community members and friends-of-friends, allowing them to hear from current volunteers and ask all their CASA questions. The Mitten Brewing Company mixer in June of 2023 resulted in three men completing volunteer training in September. Following a coed mixer in September 2023, several prospective volunteers submitted applications. Two of them completed training in November, and others hope to attend training in March.

CASA of Kent County is excited to continue offering mixer events, both at The Mitten Brewing Company and new locations throughout 2024.



Our next volunteer recruitment mixer will be held at The Mitten Brewing Company on February 8, 2024. Scan the code below or visit casakentco.org/event/the-mitten-mixer-3/.



Check out casakentco.org/events for the most up-to-date list of upcoming CASA events!



1



2



3



4



5

1. Heart of CASA award recipient Kay Bylenga and CASA program manager Kari Frederick.
2. Rookie of the Year award recipient Marni Vyn and executive director Stephanie Sheler.
3. Foster care supervisor Ashley Hemenstall and CASA volunteer Nancy Garber share their story of advocacy with event emcee Kevin Nelson.
4. Guests enjoy "We Are Stronger Together" presentation.
5. Advocate of the Year award recipient Pat Grabenstein and executive director Stephanie Sheler.

Event photos by Deborah Hoag Photography



WE ARE STRONGER TOGETHER

HEART OF CASA 2023

CASA of Kent County held its annual Heart of CASA dinner on October 19, 2023. Familiar faces and new friends gathered at The High Five GR, an exciting new venue, to honor award recipients and garner support for CASA's mission for the coming year. Delicious food and twinkling lights helped set the evening's tone.

The CASA community celebrated "Rookie of the Year" Marni Vyn and "Advocate of the Year" Pat Grabenstein for their dedicated advocacy. Kay Bylenga, a long-time CASA supporter, current volunteer, and former staff and board member, was presented with the well-deserved 2023 Heart of CASA award. Kay's acceptance of the award and her moving speech that followed brought a standing ovation.

Later that night, guests heard the story of a CASA child, Desirae,* who safely reunited with her mom thanks to support from her CASA, Nancy, and foster care caseworker, Ashley. Desirae's story came to life through a first-person reading by friend of CASA, Adalynn McAvoy, and a moving interview with Nancy and Ashley themselves.

The CASA community proved we are indeed stronger together through generous gifts of time and money. We are so thankful to everyone who contributed to a wonderful Heart of CASA event this year!

SAVE THE DATE! CASA OF KENT COUNTY ANNUAL LUNCHEON

Thursday, April 25, 2024
11:30am – 1:00pm
Frederik Meijer Gardens & Sculpture Park

THANK YOU, SPONSORS!

Tom and Kay Bylenga
Meijer
West Michigan Community Bank
Key Bank
Celebration Cinema
Gilmore Catering
Andy Rent and Susie Gordon
The Boutelier Family
Creston Industrial Sales
Devries Dental
Neil Siebert with First Community Mortgage
Patrick and Katherine Mullen
Pioneer Construction
Success Realty
West Michigan
Churchill Mortgage
The High Five GR



VOLUNTEER & DONOR SPOTLIGHT

Meet the Lemmons

Ron and Jeannine Lemmon have always been active members of the Grand Rapids community. Throughout their adult lives, both Ron and Jeannine have actively volunteered and served on several boards and committees. Over time, they found themselves being drawn toward direct, hands-on service roles where they could work with clients in the community.

Journey to advocacy

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in 2020, Ron and Jeannine were no longer permitted to volunteer in the emergency department of a local hospital. They began looking for new ways to get involved and described their journey to CASA as “serendipitous.” The Lemmons knew of CASA of Kent County and its mission from public service announcements on WYCE local public radio (another nonprofit where they volunteer). During their hospital volunteer hiatus, they each separately began considering the idea of becoming a court appointed special advocate. One day, Jeannine saw a Facebook post and mentioned the idea to Ron, when he’d been thinking about the same thing.

The Lemmons completed their CASA training in the winter of 2021. They learned about child welfare in Kent County and had an idea of what to expect, but during our conversations with them, Ron and Jeannine both emphasized the impact of their first advocate supervisor, Deb, in helping them learn the ropes. As their supervisor, Deb taught the Lemmons how to handle new and unpredictable situations as they arose and helped them hone their advocacy skills.

Two is better than one

As a husband-and-wife duo, Ron and Jeannine have the unique ability to split their time between their CASA children and have a higher capacity to visit them in different placements. Together and individually, they visit the four children involved in their case who live in separate foster homes in different towns. When asked about the role, Jeannine said, “I don’t know how I would do this without him as a partner.” Together, Ron and Jeannine are helping to ensure their CASA children’s needs are met and that the kids are meeting developmental milestones. The best part about being CASA volunteers according to the Lemmons? Hugs from their sweet kiddos.

Beyond volunteering

In addition to their roles as advocates, the Lemmons support CASA of Kent County as both ambassadors and donors. Ron and Jeannine shared that, like their volunteer work, philanthropy has been a priority for them, and that they’re drawn to small organizations like CASA that make a “lean and mean direct impact.” The Lemmons support CASA with their own donations and by promoting CASA’s mission in their personal networks, inviting friends to CASA events, and sharing about their work as volunteers.

When asked what they would say to folks interested in learning more about CASA, Ron reflected, “It has been extremely rewarding. As difficult as it is to see what these kids go through, the prospect of making a difference in their lives makes it worth it.”

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Ron Lemmon



THIS SEASON, BE THEIR HOPE.

YOUR SUPPORT GIVES A CHILD HOPE THROUGH THE GIFT OF ADVOCACY.



To donate with a credit card, go to casakentco.org/give or scan the QR code.

How you can help

Volunteer

Be a voice for a child in need. CASA of Kent County trains new volunteers four times a year. To learn more, visit our website or give us a call. We’d be happy to chat.

Spread the word

Tell others about CASA of Kent County and the needs of children who have experienced abuse or neglect. Encourage them to learn more and to visit our website.

Donate

Consider donating to support CASA’s mission of advocacy. Donations are accepted online or by mailed check. If you would like to learn about other options, reach out to us.

Contact us

casakentco.org
casakentco.org
 616.632.5311

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KENT COUNTY

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CASA CONNECT WINTER 2023

INSIDE

Team Caroline
A Dad's Perspective

Note from the Executive Director

The Faces of CASA:
Welcome New Board Members!

New! Volunteer Recruitment Mixers

Heart of CASA 2023

Volunteer & Donor Spotlight