



## A REUNIFICATION OF FIRSTS

*By Molly Charlebois*

### From Virginia Beach to Kent County

When I began my work at CASA of Kent County, I came with experience from Virginia Beach CASA and a strong belief in the mission of advocating for children in the child welfare system. I watched children float in the dark ocean waters that are the judicial process and foster care. Some children were given a lighthouse—a CASA volunteer—someone to shed a little light through help and support. A CASA is meant to help guide the child back to a safe home, whether that's through adoption, guardianship, or reunification. In the court system, reunification is the desired outcome. Still, despite this and my years in this field, I had never supervised a case that ended in reunification—until now.

### The Case: A Baby in Crisis

Reunification is always the primary goal when it can be done safely. But it often feels like the most elusive outcome. That's why this case involving a baby boy born in October 2023 has stayed with me.

He was five months old when he was removed from his parents' care. He was severely underweight, hadn't been taken to his doctor appointments, and was being fed only water and applesauce. When social workers advised his parents to take him to the ER, they didn't—choosing instead to attempt to flee with the child. Thankfully, authorities intervened and the baby was placed with his uncle and aunt, though even that came with its own tension, as the relationship between the relatives and the baby's parents was fractured.

### Building Trust and Piecing Together the Truth

Theresa, a CASA volunteer I supervise, was appointed in May 2024 when the baby was just seven months old. From the start, the parents were cautious and skeptical—understandably so. Many parents involved in child welfare have learned not to trust professionals. But Theresa was patient, kind, and unwavering in her approach. She didn't rush the relationship; she earned it.

At her very first hearing, the judge tasked CASA with clearing up the timeline: What happened from the child's birth to his removal? What were the parents told at the hospital? Why weren't follow-up appointments kept? Theresa dove in. She obtained hospital records, spoke to multiple doctors and daycare staff, and pieced together a clear and honest picture for the court.

### Above and Beyond

Theresa didn't stop there. She stayed in close contact with everyone involved—parents, caregiver relatives, in-home visitors, caseworkers, and daycare providers. She documented everything, copied me on all correspondence, and showed up for every court hearing and meeting about the family's case. She was a consistent, trusted presence. Over time, the parents opened up to her. They were still cautious, but they were honest. And I believe that's because Theresa made them feel seen, not judged.

She was supportive, yes, but she was also objective. When she noticed unsafe conditions, she documented them. When progress was made, she celebrated it. She reminded the parents gently, but firmly, of the needs still unmet. The parents didn't just complete their required services—they went above and beyond. Theresa connected them to parenting groups and gave them ideas for bonding activities. They repaired relationships, built a support system, and gained critical knowledge of child development, nutrition, and safe care.

A NOTE FROM EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR  
STEPHANIE SHELER

It turns out my adult son David, now a proud homeowner, has established some clear rules for me: no stopping by unannounced, no entering without knocking (even when he knows I’m coming), and no visiting so often that it feels like I’m checking up on him.

What’s funny is that none of these rules apply to David. He can drop by my house anytime. He walks right in without knocking, even if I wasn’t expecting him. And I’d welcome him every single day, especially if he were checking on me.

I know exactly what’s going on here, and I’m guessing you do too. My house was David’s home for more than two decades. It’s where he came home from the hospital as a newborn. It’s where he played—and fought—with his big brother, learned to play tee-ball in the backyard, read books with me curled up on the sofa, played hockey on the makeshift rink built (and carefully watered) by his dad, and recovered from a broken leg after a skiing accident. This house holds so many of his childhood memories, and it still feels like home. And when a place is home, you get to come and go as you please.

“Home” was the theme of CASA’s 2025 Annual Luncheon, and some of the most moving moments came from students at Catholic Central High School. Art students filled the room with paintings and clay sculptures, each one a personal take on what “home” means. The Women’s Chorale shared two beautiful songs that stayed with us long after the event ended. Through their art and music, these students reminded us that home is more than just a place.



Stephanie Sheler  
Executive Director

Several of the art students also shared written reflections on what home means to them. Again and again, the same themes appeared: safety, love, and “a place where I can be completely myself.” That language came straight from the students—and it stuck with me.

For many children in foster care, those things are uncertain or disrupted. CASA’s mission is to help restore that sense of home—by supporting children and their families, and by advocating for the safe, stable, and permanent connections they need to thrive. Often, the best possible outcome is reunification with family, and we are honored to walk alongside parents, caregivers, and professionals to make that possible. When that’s not an option, our volunteers continue to advocate until a child finds another permanent place to belong. In every case, we are working toward the same goal: a home where a child can be safe, known, and completely themselves.

I still smile at David’s rules and the unspoken truth behind them. He knows what it means to have a place where you’re known and loved, and I hope he always feels that sense of home when he walks through our door. Every child deserves that. And thanks to you—our volunteers, donors, luncheon guests, and community partners—more children in Kent County are getting the chance to experience it. Whether you give your time, your resources, or your voice, you are part of making home possible for the kids who need it most. Thank you for standing with us in this work.

A REUNIFICATION  
OF FIRSTS (CONTINUED)

A Family Transformed

Through it all, we watched this baby boy grow. His failure to thrive diagnosis was removed in January 2025. He was hitting milestones, gaining weight, and learning to trust. He’s a chunky little thing now. He’s walking, smiling, and laughing, and he recently became a big brother to a little sister his parents are now well-equipped to care for. He is back home with his parents. He’s safe. He’s thriving. And for the first time in my CASA career, I got to be part of a reunification that didn’t just feel like a checkbox—it felt like a triumph.

Why This One Matters

I share this story because it reminds me why we do this. Those dark ocean waters between removal and reunification are vast, and the journey is imperfect. But they are possible to overcome. Reunification, when it works, is one of the most hopeful, human outcomes we can witness. And volunteers like Theresa—steady, compassionate, diligent, bright—light the way.



Molly Charlebois

CASA DAY AT THE CAPITOL 2025



Did you know CASA of Kent County receives vital funding through the State of Michigan’s Department of Health and Human Services? This support flows through Michigan CASA—our state-level organization—to help local programs like ours grow and thrive.

Last budget year, Michigan CASA secured \$2.25 million in funding to support CASA of Kent County and our counterparts in other counties across the state of Michigan. Additionally, advocacy from the Michigan CASA network led to the passing of House Bill 5429 of 2024, which established Michigan CASA in state law, prescribing the duties and responsibilities of the organization. This important milestone will help ensure the sustainability and success of statewide CASA programs for years to come.

Each spring, as the Michigan Legislature works on the upcoming fiscal year’s budget, CASA programs from across the state come together to advocate for continued support. In April, CASA of Kent County Executive Director Stephanie Sheler and Development & Marketing Specialist Sam Johnson traveled to Lansing to join colleagues from across Michigan in making our case to lawmakers.

Stephanie and Sam met with state senators and representatives from the Kent County delegation to express gratitude for CASA’s previous inclusion in the state budget and to share how that funding has directly benefited local children. They also asked for continued support to ensure our advocacy can reach even more young people in the future.

Beyond legislative meetings, Stephanie and Sam had the opportunity to explore the historic Michigan State Capitol, connect with other CASA staff and volunteers, and learn more about the incredible work happening in communities across the state.

A big thank-you to Michigan CASA for organizing such a meaningful event—and to our Kent County legislators for taking the time to meet with us and champion the needs of vulnerable children.

MOM ALWAYS SAYS 2025:  
HONORING THE POWER AND  
COMPLEXITY OF MOTHERHOOD

Our parents inevitably shape who we become—and for many of us, our relationship with our mother leaves a lasting imprint. Mom Always Says, an annual event hosted by local author group The Writer’s Alley, celebrates motherhood in all its forms. The event invites community members to share and listen to stories that are beautiful, messy, heartfelt, and sometimes painful—reflecting on the full complexity of what it means to be a mother or to have one.

The 2025 Mom Always Says event continued the powerful tradition of storytelling and connection established in years past. Keynote speaker Caitlin Horrocks shared a deeply moving account of being pregnant with twins while unexpectedly losing her own mother during that time—a poignant reflection on grief, legacy, and maternal love. Other speakers offered humorous, touching, and thought-provoking stories about their mothers and their own journeys through motherhood, illuminating the diverse and deeply personal experiences that connect us all.

As an organization centered on advocating for children and supporting the relationships that shape their lives, CASA of Kent County is proud to once again partner with this meaningful event. Mom Always Says fosters community through honest storytelling—just as CASA works to bring people together to uplift and support children and families.

We are grateful for the opportunity to not only raise critical funds but also engage with fellow members of the West Michigan community who are committed to making a difference.



OUTCOMES UPDATE

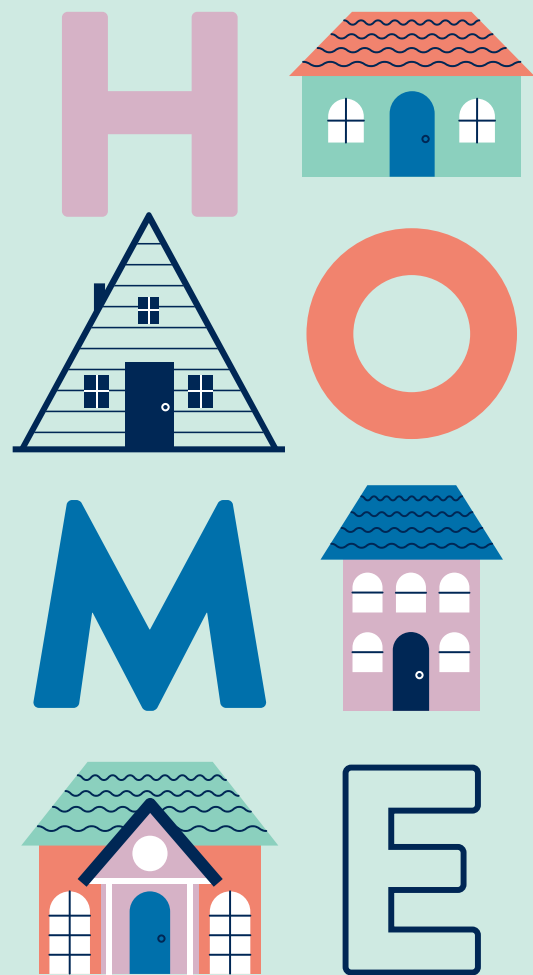
January – March 2025

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.

37 REQUESTS FOR A CASA VOLUNTEER  
137 CHILDREN SERVED  
84 ASSIGNED VOLUNTEERS

61 COURT REPORTS WRITTEN  
7 NEWLY TRAINED VOLUNTEERS  
14 CHILDREN ACHIEVED PERMANENCY





## CASA OF KENT COUNTY Annual Luncheon 2025

**368**

Total attendees

**206**

Total individual/household  
and corporate donors

**71**

First-time donors

**35**

Guests interested  
in volunteering

**\$71,025**

Amount raised

If you've ever attended a CASA of Kent County luncheon, you know the atmosphere is one of warmth, passion, and purpose—and this year was no exception. The 2025 Annual Luncheon, themed Home, was our largest and most impactful event yet. Held at the beautiful Frederik Meijer Gardens & Sculpture Park, the luncheon welcomed 368 guests for an inspiring afternoon of community connection and shared commitment.

Attendees enjoyed a custom art exhibit and heard a moving choir performance thanks to talented students from Catholic Central High School—both highlighting the emotional impact and importance of a safe, loving home.

The program also featured powerful messages from key voices in the CASA network. The Honorable Deborah McNabb spoke about the vital role of child advocacy in her courtroom. She emphasized the difference CASA volunteers make in the lives of vulnerable children. Longtime CASA volunteer Ginger Randall shared her heartfelt journey advocating for several children, including a young man who aged out of the foster care system without finding a permanent home.

Executive Director Stephanie Sheler closed the program with a compelling call to action, challenging guests to help expand CASA's reach so that every child in Kent County has the consistent, caring advocate they deserve.

This year's luncheon was a poignant reminder of what home truly means: a safe, loving, and accepting place—and the people who create it. Together, we can ensure every child in our community has the chance to experience that sense of belonging.

### THANK YOU, SPONSORS

The Jeff & Cheryl Baker  
Family Foundation,  
Presenting Sponsor

Blackwell Insurance Services

West Bend Insurance Company

Fifth Third Bank

West Michigan Community Bank

The Boutelier Family

Stratus Psychological Services

Creston Industrial Sales

Success Realty

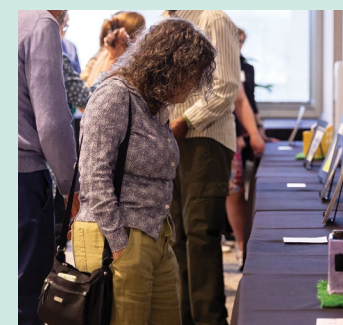
Ron & Jeannine Lemmon,  
Patriot Realty

Nienhuis Financial Group LLC



### SAVE THE DATE

**Heart of CASA**  
**October 16, 2025**  
**The High Five GR**



1. Guests pose at photo backdrop. (Photo credit: Charla Dee)
2. Attendees enjoy networking time prior to event program. (Photo credit: Deb Hoag)
3. Guests explore student art exhibit. (Photo credit: Deb Hoag)
4. Catholic Central High School Women's Chorale performs for guests. (Photo credit: Deb Hoag)
5. Attendees enjoy "Home" presentation. (Photo credit: Deb Hoag)

## EXPRESS EMPLOYMENT PROFESSIONALS: A PATH TO A BETTER FUTURE



Since opening its doors in the Greater Grand Rapids community in 1996, Express Employment Professionals has operated with a deep belief: that a good job is about more than just a paycheck. It's about purpose, connection, and the opportunity to grow. This belief continues to drive everything they do today—helping individuals find not just employment, but also fulfillment and a path to a better future.

At the heart of Express is Janis Patrini, the dedicated owner whose passion for people is evident in every facet of her work. Janis is driven by a desire to help individuals recognize their potential, develop their talents, and discover a meaningful career. "We know that strong leaders create stronger teams," Janis says. "And when people are empowered to reach their potential, everyone benefits."

Janis' commitment extends far beyond business. Her compassion for others reaches into the community through both Express and their partner organization, Frontline Training Solutions. "We're all in this together," she emphasizes.

### "Our business priority should be building strong communities."

That spirit of community led Janis to CASA of Kent County. Introduced through a client who volunteers with CASA, Janis was moved by the organization's mission after attending a luncheon. Inspired, she invited CASA staff to speak with her entire team, ensuring everyone understood the impact of their work.

What began as an introduction blossomed into a powerful and enduring partnership. Earlier this year, Express proudly became CASA's first official Community Impact Partner. Janis explains that investing in the community through CASA of Kent County provides Express with an authentic focus on social responsibility. This focus strengthens their business and their employees' sense of meaning and purpose.

"At Express, we're in the business of making a difference in people's lives," she says. "We are passionate about connecting people. Through our partnership with CASA, we hope to inspire others to get involved, too."





Meet the humans  
of CASA:

Senator  
Winnie  
Brinks



CASAKENTCO.ORG/HUMANS

HUMANS OF CASA OF KENT COUNTY

“There’s a big difference between wishing for a better world and participating in one,” says Senator Winnie Brinks. It’s a belief she’s lived out over years of public service, a commitment that started long before she entered the Michigan Legislature.

Before holding office, Senator Brinks worked in local schools, where she saw up close the many children who face serious challenges—challenges that go far beyond the classroom. Later, as a caseworker, she helped people stay employed while dealing with personal crises that could have easily pushed them out of work. These early roles gave her a deep understanding of how systems affect real people, especially those who are already struggling.

“It was important to me that the ones making decisions in our state were people who cared about making government policy and programs work for those who struggle most,” she says. That conviction led her to run for office—and continues to shape the work she does today.

In both the Michigan House and Senate, Senator Brinks has focused on making life better for families. She has championed clean water initiatives, equitable maternal healthcare, and access to affordable prescription drugs. At the center of it all is a simple goal: to help people live healthier, more secure lives.

That goal aligns closely with the mission of CASA. Senator Brinks sees the difference CASA volunteers make in the lives of children. “There are so many people who struggle with the basics of survival—and that plays out every day in our child welfare system,” she says. “CASA makes it possible for good-hearted people to do more than wish for a better world—it empowers them to make a tangible, life-changing difference for kids who are going through the hardest time of their lives.”

She also understands that the rewards of volunteering often go both ways. To those thinking about becoming a CASA volunteer, she offers this encouragement: “Being a CASA allows you to be a participant in the kind of world you want to live in—where a child’s feeling of helplessness might be met by at least one caring, attentive adult who will make a difference. I’m guessing you’ll walk away feeling like you were the one who benefited most.”

For Senator Brinks, building a better world means stepping up—and encouraging others to do the same.

COREWELL HEALTH  
GRAND ROUNDS

CASA of Kent County’s executive director, Stephanie, recently had the honor of presenting at Pediatric Grand Rounds hosted by Corewell Health. Her talk, “The Intersection of Health and Advocacy: The Impact of CASA Programs Statewide on Pediatric Well-Being,” focused on the vital role advocacy plays in improving outcomes for children across Michigan.

Stephanie’s presentation was centered around CASA programs being powerful allies in promoting pediatric health and stability. By providing consistent, trained volunteer advocates for children in the child welfare system, CASA helps ensure that each child’s unique medical, emotional, and developmental needs are met.

We’re incredibly grateful to Corewell Health for the warm welcome and the opportunity to engage with such a dedicated community of healthcare professionals. It was inspiring to see our shared commitment of ensuring every child has access to the care, support, and advocacy they need to thrive.

Opportunities like these deepen our partnerships with the healthcare community and remind us of the collective impact we can have when we work together.

Want to learn more about how your organization could work together with CASA or invite us to speak with your team or organization? We’d love to connect. Visit [casakentco.org/contact](https://casakentco.org/contact) to get in touch.

Together, we can make sure every child’s voice is heard—and their health is prioritized.



EVERY CHILD  
HAS A STORY.  
HELP THEM  
SPEAK UP.



BE  
THEIR  
VOICE.



Scan with your phone or  
visit [tiny.cc/BeTheirVoice](https://tiny.cc/BeTheirVoice).

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.

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.

Partners

Michigan CASA  
National CASA/GAL Association for Children  
Heart of West Michigan United Way



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.

Contact us

[casa@kentcountymi.gov](mailto:casa@kentcountymi.gov)  
[casakentco.org](https://casakentco.org)  
616.632.5311

Board Members

- Derek Aten  
Chair
- Tara Kiely  
Vice Chair
- Nancy Brozek  
Secretary
- Christina Burr  
Treasurer
- Geoff Boutelier
- Claire Guisfredi
- Heidi Hendricks
- Bill Holmes
- Angie Mason-Maranda
- Kathy Mullen
- Kevin Nelson
- Kristen Snyder
- Amanda Witte
- Stephanie Sheler  
Executive Director
- Carrie Shoesmith  
Administrative Manager
- Samantha Johnson  
Development & Marketing Specialist
- Daliecia Conkle  
Program Manager
- Leah Rettig  
Advocacy Manager
- Amanda Brader  
Advocate Supervisor
- Molly Charlebois  
Advocate Supervisor

# CASA CONNECT SUMMER 2025

## INSIDE

**A Reunification of Firsts**

**Note from the Executive Director**

**CASA Day at the Capitol**

**Mom Always Says 2025**

**Annual Luncheon 2025 Recap**

**Express Employment Professionals:**  
A Path to a Better Future

**Humans of CASA Kent County:**  
Senator Winnie Brinks

**Corewell Health Grand Rounds**

