

# CASA CONNECT



## IMPACT STORY

As part of our 30 stories for 30 years campaign, we'd like to introduce you to Rod and Jan Johnson, who have been involved with CASA for 18 years!



### The first husband and wife co-CASA team

Rod and Jan Johnson became CASA volunteers in 2004 because they wanted to find a volunteer activity they could do together. Their sons were growing older, and Rod and Jan had time to help their community. After seeing an ad in the local newspaper

for a program called "CASA," Jan called to learn more. Soon, Rod and Jan completed the required training and were equipped with the essentials needed for advocating for children in foster care. When they were sworn in as officers of the court, they became the first-ever husband-and-wife co-CASA team.

### Advocacy begins

Serving as CASA partners turned out to be beneficial for their first case: a sibling group of four living in multiple foster homes. Together, Rod and Jan visited the children, took them to the park to play, and kept track of the kids' developmental milestones. Rod and Jan entered the situation as impartial observers looking for the best solution for the children, and it soon became clear to them that the case was likely headed toward termination. Their next goal then became to keep the children together. However, four siblings soon turned to five when the children's mother had another baby. Suddenly, Rod and Jan had another child to advocate for.

### A forever adoptive family

With five children needing a permanent home, Rod and Jan, along with the adoption agency, were faced with the challenge of finding parents willing to

(continued inside)

## OUTCOMES UPDATE

October 1, 2021 – June 30, 2022

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

- 49** Requests for a CASA volunteer
- 142** Children served
- 80** Active volunteers
- 28** Newly trained volunteers
- 39** Children achieved permanency

Thank you to our generous donors and committed volunteers for making these numbers possible.

A NOTE FROM  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR  
STEPHANIE SHELER

“I keep hearing it takes a village to raise a child. Do they just show up? Or is there a number to call or something?”

As the new executive director at CASA, I have experienced a year of firsts. In April, I attended my first CASA luncheon, where I shared the quote above that Rosemary Allen, one of CASA's advocate supervisors, has hanging in her office.

I was fortunate to have a strong, capable, involved village when I was raising my children. This support made the difference between just surviving and genuinely thriving as a parent. However, in our community here in Kent County, not everyone has a village.

When children experience abuse and neglect, it's often a result of generational trauma. It's our responsibility and privilege to work to break that cycle for these children and their families.

When children are removed from their parents and placed in foster care, they need a court-appointed special advocate to be their voice in family court and in the child welfare system. If a CASA volunteer can change the story for one child, that child can change the story for the next generation.

That's the power of a CASA.

With new leadership at CASA, this has been a period of transition for us all. I am in awe of you and your commitment to strengthening the CASA village over the past 30 years. It is an honor to serve as your executive director, and I look forward to the future.



BUILD YOUR OWN  
ELEVATOR PITCH

Recently, CASA staff and board members have been thinking about how to communicate our work succinctly when interacting with individuals in the community.

We each shared words and phrases that define CASA's mission and, upon doing so, noticed clear patterns. Many of us used words such as advocacy, volunteers, families, donors, court, foster care, and the phrase “a voice for every child.” These are words we can use in an elevator pitch.



What is an elevator pitch?

An elevator pitch is a concise and persuasive summary that highlights the most important parts of an organization. It usually ends with a call to action and continued conversation.

How might I use a CASA elevator pitch?

Whether you're a volunteer, donor, community member, or all three, you're an important part of the CASA village. To

continue our legacy of creating generational change in our community, we must spread the word about the importance of advocating for children who have experienced abuse and neglect. If someone asks you about CASA, an elevator pitch can help you have an effective impact in a short amount time.

This is our formula for a powerful and effective CASA elevator pitch.

- 1 PRESENT THE PROBLEM  
Children who have experienced abuse and neglect are removed from their homes and placed in temporary living situations until they can return to safe, loving, and permanent homes, either with their family, a guardian, or adoptive parents. Judges must make life-changing decisions on behalf of these children who are unable to advocate for themselves in court.
- 2 INTRODUCE YOUR SOLUTION  
CASA volunteers—court-appointed special advocates—serve as the eyes and ears of the court by developing a relationship with the child or sibling group and collaborating with all the stakeholders working with the family. These volunteers advocate for the child's best interest in court, essentially giving them a voice.
- 3 SHARE YOUR VALUE PROPOSITION  
Children who have a CASA volunteer assigned to their case receive more services, report higher levels of hope, and achieve permanency more quickly. By interrupting the cycle of trauma for one child, CASA volunteers are creating change for the greater Kent County community.
- 4 STATE YOUR CALL TO ACTION  
Anyone can make a difference in a child's life. By volunteering, contributing, or spreading the word, the CASA village can continue to build a sustainable legacy of community impact for years to come.



The CASA team enjoyed celebrating with State Senator Winnie Brinks (third from right) by posing for a few photos.

SENATOR WINNIE BRINKS  
RECOGNIZES A LOCAL LEGACY

In June, CASA of Kent County was presented with a special tribute in honor of our 30th birthday. Our local representative, State Senator Winnie Brinks, stopped by the Kent County Courthouse to pay us a visit and deliver the tribute.

The tribute recognizes the impact the CASA program has made in the lives of children in foster care in Kent County over the past three decades. It states, “Thanks to the dedication of its staff and the generosity of its donors, CASA has made a significant impact. A child who connects with one of CASA's highly trained volunteers spends less time in the foster care system, is half as likely to re-enter foster care, has better outcomes in school, and is connected to more of the available services that can help them to thrive.”

The tribute is signed by Senator Brinks, Lieutenant Governor Garlin Gilchrist II, and Governor Gretchen Whitmer.



Senator Brinks presents a special tribute to Stephanie Sheler.

# EVERY CHILD DESERVES A VOICE: ANNUAL LUNCHEON SUCCESS

After a two-year break because of the pandemic, CASA volunteers, donors, board members, staff, and guests gathered on April 20, 2022, for CASA’s Annual Luncheon.

During the program, Court Referee Craig Frederick reminded guests that the court relies on CASA volunteers to be their “eyes and ears” in the community, and volunteers Beth and Casey shared their stories of advocacy. In addition, three adult readers shared the first-person stories of three children—Frankie, Henry, and Zoe—who were waiting for a CASA volunteer. The stories of these children made the abstract concepts of abuse and neglect very real and had a profound impact on those in the room. Guests rose to the challenge to spread the word about CASA’s work, to consider becoming a volunteer, and to donate to support the CASA mission. We are so thankful for the support of our CASA village!

255

Total attendees

100+

First-time guests

190

Total individual/  
household donors

95

First-time donors

12

Attendees interested  
in volunteering

\$80,041

Dollars raised



CASA board members pose with the CASA 30. Event photos by Robert Mohr Photography.

Thank you to our sponsors!

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Jonathan and Abbey Sheler



“I wanted to take a moment to thank you for inviting me to the luncheon. It [the stories of the children CASA helps] hit close to home and left an impression in a profound way that I can’t express with words. I am glad there are people from CASA making a positive difference in our community.”

Steven

First-time event attendee and new donor

SAVE THE DATE  
HEART OF CASA EVENT

October 6, 2022, 5:30-8:30pm



DONOR SPOTLIGHT

Kari Williams & Craig Frederick

At last, after 14 years together, CASA of Kent County Program Manager Kari Williams and 17th Circuit Court Referee Craig Frederick celebrated their wedding in May of 2022.



The Fredericks’ love story is one that has been heavily influenced by CASA. Both passionate supporters of the CASA mission to give every child a voice, Kari and Craig have worked hard to support the organization for many years. The two first met during Kari’s first case as a CASA volunteer, more than 17 years ago. They worked

together, with Kari as a CASA and Craig as guardian ad litem, to find a safe, loving, and permanent home for a group of siblings. After the case ended, Kari and Craig remained close and have been together ever since!

When Kari and Craig decided to be officially married in 2022, they knew they had an opportunity to make a difference with their wedding gifts. Since they already had everything they could possibly need for their home, they decided that, in lieu of gifts, they would suggest that their guests make donations to CASA of Kent County. Kari said, “Why not have those gifts go to support a program that we are passionate about and is needed in the community? Gifts to CASA will fund the training of new volunteers to advocate for abused and neglected children in our community, and that’s what we want: for every child to have a voice.”

The wedding was a beautiful celebration of the happy couple and reflected Kari and Craig’s hard work in the community. The guests included many local judges, lawyers, referees, and CASA staff members. Together they raised over \$3,500 to support essential CASA programming. Thank you, Kari and Craig, for your consistent hard work to ensure that every child can have what he or she deserves: a safe, loving, and permanent home!

IMPACT STORY CONTINUED

provide a forever family. They worked hard to advocate for the children to stay together and, despite unexpected complications, eventually were able to find the perfect home where all five siblings could live safely and permanently and grow up together.

Rod and Jan visited the children to say goodbye shortly after the adoption. They had spent two years advocating for this group of children in court and were so happy to see them find a loving home. They knew they needed to step back so the children could bond with their adoptive family, but they still stay in touch over Facebook.

A second case

With one case closed, Rod and Jan moved on to another case: infant twin sisters who had been removed from their home. The parents had been running a business out of their home and did not realize that they had been creating an unsafe and unsanitary living situation for their daughters until it was too late. Child Protective Services was called, and the girls were placed together in foster care.

A family reunited

It was clear to Rod and Jan, after getting to know the girls and observing their visits with their mom and dad, that the parents would be able to take the necessary steps to create

a safe living situation. Rod and Jan advocated before the court for reunification. The parents received the support they needed to create a safe home for their daughters, and the case was resolved quickly. Rod and Jan were overjoyed to see the girls return home.

A CASA legacy

Through these two cases, Rod and Jan were able to impact the lives of seven children by standing with them as a consistent presence as they waited for safe, loving, and permanent homes. Rod and Jan learned about the reality of the child welfare system in Kent County. They witnessed the processes of both adoption and reunification. Rod and Jan now understand the level of commitment it takes—from multiple parties—to ensure that children can have what they deserve: a safe, loving, and permanent home.

Rod and Jan’s time as advocates has led them to stay involved with CASA over the years. They have supported CASA financially as donors and attended an in-person event for the first time when our executive director, Stephanie Sheler, personally invited them to the 2022 Annual Luncheon in April. Thank you, Rod and Jan, for your dedication to our community and its children!

VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT

Michael Edozie

“It’s an important commitment, so you should be thoughtful about it and not take it lightly, but the team will be there to support you along the way!”



Meet Michael! He decided to become a CASA volunteer during the spring of 2020 after seeing the impact of the pandemic on the child welfare system. He had heard how there was an increase in child abuse and domestic violence because people were home more. He also realized that these incidents were not being reported as frequently as they

should have been, largely because children were not in school and social workers were not making home visits. Michael recognized that the need for advocacy was greater than ever. Since becoming a CASA, Michael has taken a case where he advocates for a young boy who is in foster care. Michael enjoys spending time with him and having fun. Yet being a CASA volunteer is more than that. Michael is also an objective observer for the court and testifies regarding the boy’s best interests at each hearing. When asked whether he had any advice for someone interested in volunteering, Michael said, “It’s an important commitment, so you should be thoughtful about it and not take it lightly, but the team will be there to support you along the way!”



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.

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.

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  
casakentco.org  
616.632.5311



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# CASA CONNECT SUMMER 2022

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