

CASA CONNECT



THE GIFT OF ADVOCACY

When law enforcement officers were called to the Wilsons' apartment, they found the place in an unlivable state of disarray. Ms. Wilson, mother to eight-year-old Beth, had been having another severe mental health episode.

Previously, Ms. Wilson had been investigated three other times for reports of substance use and Beth's poor hygiene at school. Ms. Wilson had also repeatedly declined to seek treatment for Beth's developmental delays despite receiving several referrals to specialists. After this final report, Beth was removed from her mother's home and placed in foster care.

The judge knew additional advocacy would benefit Beth, so she appointed a court-appointed special advocate named Stacy. Stacy immediately got to work, meeting with the foster parents and caseworker. Stacy built a caring relationship with Beth, becoming a consistent supportive adult during this tumultuous time. Beth has since been diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder, and Stacy has met with her therapist to ensure she receives proper care. Stacy's advocacy has been instrumental in getting Beth the services and support she needs.

Ms. Wilson has begun the foster care agency's parenting plan and is making progress toward reunification with Beth. Stacy has advocated for Ms. Wilson to take autism-specific parenting training to better meet Beth's needs. While Ms. Wilson still has work ahead, Beth now has an unwavering advocate in Stacy to ensure she gets the support she deserves. Stacy's commitment to Beth will help her develop resilience to cope with the changes in her life.

Advocates like Stacy provide an essential sense of hope for children like Beth. The generosity of CASA's donors, volunteers, and other stakeholders makes vital advocacy possible. You can help bring this same hope to more children in Kent County by making a year-end gift today.

OUTCOMES UPDATE

July – September 2024

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.

- 20** Requests for a CASA volunteer
- 134** Children served
- 79** Active volunteers
- 66** Court reports written
- 12** Newly trained volunteers
- 13** Children achieved permanency



Scan the code, visit tiny.cc/BeTheirHope, or mail a check to CASA of Kent County at 180 Ottawa Ave. NW, Ste. 5200, Grand Rapids, MI 49503.



HOPE IN ACTION FOR OUR COMMUNITY

Ever since my first Spanish class in high school, I’ve hoped to be fluent in the language. That hope nearly ended, however, during my freshman year of college, thanks to a Spanish professor so intimidating that I tried to disappear in the back of the classroom. My confidence was shaken, and for years, I gave up on the dream altogether.

Years later, when my oldest son started taking Spanish in school, I decided to try again, learning alongside him. I studied his vocabulary, worked on his assignments, read his reading material, and even quizzed myself after his tests came home. It felt good to be working on this goal, but as he became fluent, I realized I still struggled with speaking and listening. I needed to keep pushing, so I took classes at Grand Rapids Community College and even audited a few courses at my alma mater. Eventually, I reached a level of fluency that allowed me to use Spanish in my work with Spanish-speaking clients—a deeply rewarding experience that came through years of effort.

Hope didn’t get me there on its own. My hope of learning Spanish needed real commitment and perseverance. It meant putting myself in uncomfortable situations, pushing through failures, and picking myself up each time I fell short.

That’s the nature of hope. As the viral quote goes, “People speak of hope as if it is this delicate, ephemeral thing made of whispers and spider’s webs. It’s not. Hope has dirt on her face, blood on her knuckles, the grit of cobblestones in her hair, and just spat out a tooth as she rises for another go.” Hope is gritty, stubborn, and relentless. It’s not about wishing things were better; it’s about rolling up our sleeves and making them better.

If we want to improve the lives of children and families in our community who face abuse, neglect, and difficult circumstances, we can’t simply wish for things to get better. We must be part of the change. It takes hard work—advocating for children, supporting families, and pushing for systemic improvements. Our hope must be in the action we take together as community members and citizens.

The road to change may be tough, but with a hope that gets back up and keeps fighting, we can create real impact for those who need it most. I invite you to join us—to be their hope. Whether you volunteer, donate, or advocate, you can help create a brighter future for our community’s children and families. Together, let’s be the hope that makes a difference.



Stephanie Sheler
Executive Director

THE FACES OF CASA: WELCOME, NEW BOARD MEMBERS!

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



ANGIE MASON-MARANDA

Assistant Clinical Director/Outpatient Therapist
Counseling Center of West Michigan

Since earning dual master’s degrees in social work and public administration with a focus on nonprofit management and leadership in 2014, Angie has worked with children, adolescents, and adults in various mental health settings, including inpatient, partial hospital, and outpatient therapy. Currently, she serves as assistant clinical director of a private practice. Angie’s approach centers on providing clients of all ages, genders, and sexual orientations with a safe, nonjudgmental space to build strengths, explore growth, and develop resilience for future challenges. Witnessing the struggles of children facing complex family issues has been a core part of her experience.

After becoming a CASA volunteer in 2010, Angie was inspired by CASA’s impact in Kent County and across Michigan, which ultimately guided her career toward fostering resilience in individuals and families. Having completed a summer internship with the previous executive director of CASA of Kent County, she is passionate about CASA’s mission and values her role on the board alongside other dedicated community leaders.

Outside of work, Angie enjoys time outdoors with her husband, daughter, and family, especially hiking the scenic trails of Sleeping Bear Dunes in Northern Michigan.

THANK YOU, RETIRING BOARD MEMBERS!

This year, CASA of Kent County also wished a fond farewell to outgoing board members Andy Rent and Tony Grossa. Both Andy and Tony generously served on CASA’s board of directors for more than a decade. Thank you, Andy and Tony, for your dedication to CASA’s mission!

CASA board members are recognized for their service at 2024 Volunteer Appreciation Dinner. Pictured left to right: Tony Grossa, Andy Rent, Kathy Mullen, Amanda Witte, Stephanie Sheler.



CHRISTINA BURR

YPTC
Client Manager

Christina L. Burr, MBA, MAEd, CPA, is a seasoned financial executive dedicated to supporting nonprofit organizations through financial growth and strategic planning. As a client manager at Your Part-Time Controller, Christina oversees accounting operations for over 30 nonprofits on an outsourced basis. Previously, she served as chief financial officer at North Community Counseling Centers, managing a \$9 million-plus budget and leading financial initiatives. Her background also includes roles as chief audit executive and corporate controller, highlighting her expertise in board communications, risk management, and grant compliance.

Christina holds a master’s in education from The University of Akron, an MBA in healthcare management from Walsh University, and a bachelor’s in accounting from The University of Akron. She has also worked as a visiting lecturer at The University of Akron teaching both undergraduate and graduate courses in financial accounting and risk management.

After meeting Executive Director Stephanie Sheler at a Chamber event in 2023, Christina was immediately inspired by the impactful work CASA is doing for vulnerable children in Kent County. Recognizing the importance of the organization’s mission, she knew this was something that she wanted to be part of.

Christina resides in Rockford with her husband, Dan. They have two adult daughters, both married, and one granddaughter, who all live out of state. Christina and her husband travel as often as possible to visit them.

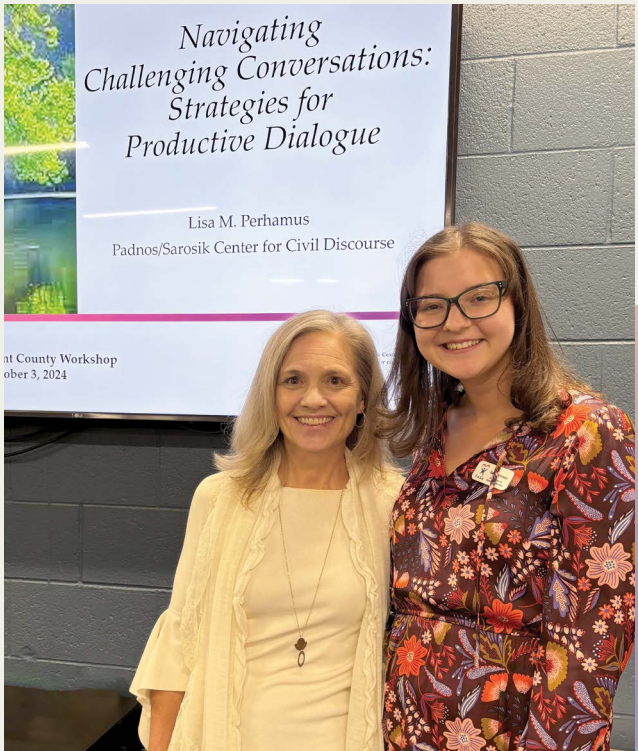
CIVIL DISCOURSE
IN-SERVICE EVENT RECAP:
NAVIGATING CHALLENGING
CONVERSATIONS

CASA of Kent County recently hosted special volunteer training with the Padnos/Sarosik Center for Civil Discourse of Grand Valley State University. The session, called “Navigating Challenging Conversations,” was all about learning ways to have productive dialogue—even when emotions are high.

Led by Lisa Perhamus, Ph.D., from the Center for Civil Discourse, the training focused on guidelines for productive conversation. Volunteers learned strategies for handling strong emotions and keeping the conversation on track. One powerful aspect of the training involved a discussion about the complex feelings that might arise during difficult discussions. By openly exploring these emotions, CASA volunteers gained valuable insight into their own responses, helping them stay grounded and effective when encountering similar situations in their advocacy roles.

Volunteers also practiced their dialogue skills with a realistic case scenario, giving them the opportunity to discuss how they might address an important yet complicated conversation. This hands-on practice highlighted the importance of maintaining focus on best-interest advocacy for the CASA child, while also navigating the diverse perspectives and emotions involved in child welfare cases.

Our CASA volunteers left the training with new confidence in their communication skills, ready to use what they learned in their work with children and families. We’re so thankful for their dedication to growing as advocates and for the support of Dr. Perhamus and the Padnos/Sarosik Center for Civil Discourse!



What a wonder-filled night! On October 10, 2024, the CASA community gathered at The High Five GR for the annual Heart of CASA dinner. Together, we celebrated award recipients, raised funds, and inspired new volunteers to support CASA’s mission in the coming year. Guests enjoyed delicious food, great company, and an atmosphere of wonder decorated with custom vases created by local art students from East Grand Rapids Middle School.

This year, CASA of Kent County proudly honored Rookie of the Year Christina Baur and Advocate of the Year Melissa Finkbeiner. Gary Pritchard, an extraordinary longtime CASA advocate, ambassador, and supporter, received the 2024 Heart of CASA Award. During his acceptance speech, Gary shared a moving story about a former student who first inspired him to begin his CASA journey many years ago.

Later, guest speaker Matt Jemilo told the story of Jeremiah, a young man nearing the end of his time in the foster care system without finding a permanent family. Matt’s words brought Jeremiah’s story to life, encouraging attendees to imagine a community where each child has a devoted advocate. The evening continued with several CASA volunteers sharing how their advocacy for Kent County’s children has made a lasting impact.

The night left the CASA community with a renewed sense of wonder and a commitment to the work ahead. We are so grateful to everyone who helped make this year’s Heart of CASA event a success!

Save the Date!
CASA Luncheon 2025

Friday, April 25, 2025
11:30 am – 1 pm
Frederik Meijer Gardens & Sculpture Park

185
Total attendees

16
Guests interested
in becoming CASA
volunteers

9
New monthly donors

\$46,454
Total raised

Thank you, sponsors!

- Meijer
- Tom & Kay Bylenga
- West Michigan Community Bank
- Celebration Cinema
- Gilmore Catering
- Andy & Susie Rent
- Creston Industrial Sales
- Devin & Rachel Render
- DeVries Dental
- The Hendricks family
- Patrick & Katherine Mullen
- Zylstra Door
- In Memory of Phyllis Snyder
- The High Five GR
- National Cabinet & Bath Association – West MI Chapter



Charla Dee Photography



Charla Dee Photography



Charla Dee Photography



Micah Hill Photography



Micah Hill Photography



Micah Hill Photography

- 1-3. Guests pose with custom photo backdrop created by student artists from East Grand Rapids Middle School.
4. Guests are welcomed by CASA Board Member Kristen Snyder.
5. Heart of CASA Award Honoree Gary Pritchard gives a heartfelt acceptance speech.
6. Guests applaud during “Wonder” presentation.

VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT

Kay Bylenga & Barb Zylstra

This edition of CASA Connect, we’re featuring a special co-CASA duo: longtime friends Kay Bylenga and Barb Zylstra. Both Kay and Barb have been committed advocates, ambassadors, and supporters of CASA’s mission in many ways. We are honored to spotlight their CASA journeys this quarter.* Thank you for your dedication to child advocacy, ladies!

Why did you decide to become a CASA volunteer?

KAY: Volunteering was always something I felt strongly about. My mother and father taught me that you should always give back to others. That lesson feels engrained in my soul. After working in the community throughout my life, I was drawn to CASA. The role let me use my passion of helping vulnerable children and gave me the opportunity to make a real difference supporting family court judges directly.

BARB: I retired in 2017. I had been working with children in a homeless shelter. I knew I wanted to find a larger volunteer role in my retirement. I’ve always had a heart for children—CASA was the right fit for me.

KAY: I met Barb when I was working with Interfaith Hospitality Network, now Family Promise, and we got connected. We became such close friends. I kept telling her she should join me and become a CASA volunteer, too. Eventually, we decided we should work together on a case. Now we’re on our third case as a CASA team!

What is something you learned in CASA training?

KAY: Oh, wow—that was a lifetime ago! I did my training in the same class as Program Manager Kari Frederick—you can look up what year that was.

BARB: Something that stood out to me was the need for advocacy and the gaps in the child welfare system. Unfortunately, some children are left behind due to the overwhelm of the system, which is where CASA advocacy can play a key role.

KAY: What really struck me about CASA training was the emphasis that this program is for the child. Most other agencies in child welfare are answering to lots of people and have many important rules to follow. CASA volunteers can streamline the process and focus just on being the voice for the child straight to the judge.

Pictured left to right: Amy Smith, Samantha Johnson, Clare Parks, Barb Zylstra, Kay Bylenga, Stephanie Sheler, Deb Kammer

*Interview answers have been edited for length and clarity.

What is your favorite part about being a CASA?

BARB: My favorite part is seeing the joy on children’s faces. The children we work with are often leery of another new adult in their lives. They have all kinds of people coming and going. When they start to recognize you, though, and they realize you’re there to stay, your visits become something they look forward to in their week. To see them smile when they’ve been faced with so much trauma is really something.

KAY: Another thing is the help and guidance from the staff. We have Kari as our advocate supervisor, and she’s “Sergeant Picky,” but she really does her due diligence to make sure that every report we send to the judges is top-notch. Seriously, though, the staff is incredible. Stephanie Sheler, CASA’s executive director, really has her finger on the pulse of what it means to take care of volunteers, the community, and donors.

What is your dynamic like as a co-CASA team?

BARB: Oh, I think we’re “good cop, bad cop” sometimes. Kay can come off very fiercely, and then I can come in and soften things up. I also think she picks up things that I miss and vice versa. We have a good working relationship, and we agree to disagree when necessary—but we hardly ever disagree.

KAY: Barb and I go all the way back. I can say anything to her, and she can say anything to me. We both have gifts in different areas, and we reflect off each other well. Barb is excellent at getting to the computer and getting the report done. She’s definitely a go-getter. I tend to want to review the case again—to learn every single detail and take

time to reflect. That has its time and place, but she helps keep us moving forward.

BARB: I’m grateful for Kay’s partnership, but I’m even more grateful for her friendship.

KAY: We play bunco together. We get dinner and drinks together. Our husbands are friends. I love Barb like a sister.

What would you say to someone who is interested in becoming a CASA?

BARB: If you feel this mission tug at your heart, don’t stop. Keep going. Learn more and become an advocate. If you can help one child move in the right direction, that’s a huge impact. You can be in their corner and be their advocate and let them know that someone cares about them.

KAY: I have a sterner approach, but I always tell people if you cannot put your heart and soul into this, don’t do it. Think it through long and hard to make sure you can make this commitment. If you decide to stop, you’re not leaving a volunteer role, you’re leaving a child.

Is there anything else you’d like to share?

KAY: There’s no one else out there doing what CASA does. I took my car to the dealership once, and a young man working there saw the CASA logo on my car. He shared that he had a CASA volunteer as a child and that she’d changed his life for the better. That was a moving experience.

BARB: Help one child at a time. Be their advocate. It’s not always comfortable, but in the long run, you’re sure making a difference. If you feel the calling, listen to it.



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.

THIS SEASON, BE HIS HOPE.

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
casakentco.org
616.632.5311

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KENT COUNTY

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CASA CONNECT WINTER 2024



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