

CASA CONNECT

WINTER 2025

BREAKING THE CYCLE: HOW JOE HELPED LENNY FIND HOPE

Trauma is often passed down through generations. Someone hurts a child, that child grows up without healing, and the cycle repeats. The saying “hurt people hurt people” exists for a reason. This cycle of trauma is a reality CASA of Kent County works within every single day.

In some CASA cases, children try to cope with their own trauma by acting out toward others. Sometimes this leads not only to removal from their home but also to criminal charges against the child who has caused harm. Foster care is already difficult to navigate—adding a court case makes it even more complicated and increases the need for strong advocacy.

When CASA volunteer Joe learned about the Andrews family’s case, he felt called to step in as an advocate for 13-year-old Lenny Andrews. Lenny had been sexually abused as a young child by someone outside of his home. Although he was now safe from his abuser, he had never received the trauma therapy he needed to begin healing. Without that support, he struggled to understand his feelings and, in his pain, acted out against his younger sister.

When allegations arose against Lenny, his parents were overwhelmed. They loved both of their children but didn’t have the resources or knowledge to provide a safe, supportive home for them at that moment. The court ultimately intervened, placing Lenny in foster care and assigning him a series of requirements to complete for a juvenile delinquency case. Meanwhile, his parents received a parenting plan from the foster care agency to help them learn the skills needed to navigate the complex situation.

This was a time when Lenny could easily have been seen only for his mistakes. But Joe saw beyond the behavior to the hurting child underneath. He showed up for Lenny—listening without judgment, encouraging him through difficult therapy sessions, and reminding him that healing and change were possible. Joe’s steady presence gave Lenny something he hadn’t felt in a long time: hope.

With Joe’s advocacy and encouragement, Lenny began to engage deeply in his required therapy. For the first time, he received trauma-informed care that helped him address both the pain from his own abuse and the guilt he carried for his actions. Joe made sure Lenny’s voice was heard in every meeting and court hearing, ensuring the adults around him recognized his progress and potential.

Continued on the next page.



CASA Connect provides regular updates from CASA of Kent County. CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocates) is the only local volunteer organization that empowers everyday community members to advocate for vulnerable children who have experienced abuse or neglect.

THE MOMENTS THAT LAST

A month or so ago, I was reminded in the sweetest way of how lasting a CASA's impact can be.

While I was meeting with a prospective board member at a local coffee shop, a woman approached me and said, "We've never met, but my son, Peter, remembers you. He had a CASA—Miss Cindy."

Peter, who's about five or six now, looked up with a grin and said, "Yes, from Christmas!" I bent down to chat with him, and he began talking about CASA's holiday party—how he got his face painted like a pirate and how much fun he had.

Peter's mom shared that two years ago, Peter and his CASA volunteer, Cindy, attended that party together. Two years later, Peter still remembers the details, the laughter, and the person who stood by him when life was uncertain. His mom spoke with such gratitude for CASA and for Miss Cindy, and it was clear how much that advocacy meant to both of them.

Cindy's advocacy changed Peter's story—and her influence continues today as she serves on her next case. The ripple effect of her care reaches far beyond her time with any one child. It shows up in a child's confidence, a parent's gratitude, and a memory that still makes a little boy smile.

As we move into the holiday season, I want to thank everyone who helps make stories like Peter's possible—our volunteers who give their hearts, our donors who sustain the work, our staff who bring care and consistency to every detail, and our community partners who share in this work every single day.

This time of year reminds us that the most meaningful gifts aren't wrapped in paper. They're the moments of connection, trust, and joy that stay with a child long after the holidays have passed. May this season bring you that same sense of gratitude and joy that you've helped create for others.



Stephanie Sheler
Executive Director

UPCOMING EVENTS FOR CURRENT CASA VOLUNTEERS

HEY, VOLUNTEERS!

Save the dates and keep your eye on your email inbox for information about these upcoming events.

JANUARY 15

CASA CONNECTIONS

5:30 – 7PM

Join us to mix and mingle with fellow volunteers and CASA staff. Food will be provided.

FEBRUARY 5

RISING IN INCLUSION & OVERCOMING BIAS WORKSHOP

5:30 – 7:30PM

International public speaker and author Graci Harkema will lead CASA's first in-service training of 2026. Graci's interactive workshop will focus on building welcoming environments, checking unconscious bias, and inclusive leadership. All attendees will leave with tangible action steps to continue to grow individually. Dinner will be provided.



Learn more by checking out Graci's website!

BREAKING THE CYCLE (CONTINUED)

Over time, Lenny worked hard to meet all of his requirements. The Andrews family, supported by professionals and guided by their CASA volunteer, also grew stronger and more equipped to care for both children safely.

Thanks to the combined efforts of Lenny, his family, the professionals involved, and CASA volunteer Joe, reunification became a safe and realistic outcome. Lenny returned home to his parents, and together they continue working toward healing and stability.

Through his dedication, empathy, and belief in Lenny's potential, Joe helped transform what could have been another chapter in a cycle of trauma into a story of hope, growth, and second chances.

SERENDIPITY OUT WEST: MEETING ANOTHER CASA

A CHANCE ENCOUNTER BETWEEN ADVOCATES AWAY FROM HOME

By Ginger Randall

Early this fall, I decided to take a much-needed vacation to the American West. The rugged landscapes, open skies, and vibrant culture promised the perfect escape from my daily routine. As a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA), my work at home was always fulfilling yet demanding, so the idea of unplugging in the Canyonlands was truly enticing.

The second morning of the trip, while eating breakfast in the hotel, I looked up, only to see the back of a CASA T-shirt at the next table. I struck up a conversation with the man wearing the shirt and his wife, Ellen, who is a CASA volunteer in Essex County, Massachusetts. It turned out we were in the same group on the same trip!

Over the next few days during our trip, Ellen and I exchanged stories from our respective regions. She had been volunteering for several years in her community and shared insights on the challenges faced by children in her area as well as in her volunteer work. It was fascinating to compare her experiences with my own. Some were similar and some were very different. For example: CASA of Kent County volunteers may transport children, whereas Essex County volunteers may not. I have been fortunate to take my CASA child to events in the community, to an appointment, or even to be able to pick them up at school. It makes me appreciate CASA of Kent County even more.

Despite the differences in our backgrounds, we bonded over the shared values that drew us to CASA: compassion, resilience, and the drive to make a difference. We talked about the emotional ups and downs of the work, the triumphs when a child found a permanent home, and the heartbreaks when progress stalled. The sense of camaraderie was instant—two travelers far from home, united by a mission to advocate for society's most vulnerable.

Meeting another CASA during my vacation was a serendipitous reminder of how widespread and interconnected our network truly is. The stories we shared reinforced my commitment and reminded me that no matter where you go, there are people dedicated to making the world a little brighter for children in need.

That chance encounter out West became one of the most memorable parts of my trip. It demonstrated that the CASA community stretches far beyond my hometown, and that the spirit of advocacy can bring together strangers in the most unexpected places.



OUTCOMES UPDATE

July 1, 2025 - September 30, 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.

- | | |
|-----|------------------------------|
| 135 | CHILDREN SERVED |
| 83 | ASSIGNED VOLUNTEERS |
| 60 | COURT REPORTS WRITTEN |
| 7 | NEWLY TRAINED VOLUNTEERS |
| 12 | CHILDREN ACHIEVED PERMANENCY |

meet the humans. feel the heart.

support the mission.

HEART OF CASA 2025 RECAP

OUTCOMES

Total Attendees

210

Guests Interested in Becoming
CASA Volunteers

20

New Donors

32

New Monthly Donors

7

Total Raised

\$83,519

Throughout 2025, CASA of Kent County has featured the people who make its mission of advocacy possible via the Humans of CASA campaign. This campaign has been an opportunity to share the written stories of individuals who selflessly support children in foster care in their community through volunteer work, philanthropy, their careers, and ambassadorship.

For Heart of CASA, the annual fundraising dinner and award ceremony, the CASA team decided to take the opportunity of having the CASA community gathered to feature some of the Humans of CASA—in person. Thus, this year’s theme was born: Meet the humans. Feel the heart.

This event provided an opportunity to recognize the invaluable impact of so many members of the CASA community. Guests enjoyed a delicious strolling dinner and mixed and mingled while reading the stories of featured Humans that were placed throughout the room. Tables were adorned—for the second year in a row—with beautiful art from East Grand Rapids Middle School students, who captured the concept of humanity with their custom sculptures.

Together, we recognized four award recipients: Andy Straub (Rookie of the Year), Ron and Jeannine Lemmon (Advocates of the Year), and Heidi Hendricks (Heart of CASA Award). Each of these individuals has made significant contributions to CASA’s mission, going above and beyond to support Kent County’s children.

During the program, guests heard from several Humans of CASA, including a panel of speakers: Guardian ad Litem Margaret Allen, Foster Care Case Manager Kaitlyn Kelly, and CASA Volunteer Matt Smith. Board Member Kevin Nelson and fellow Heart of West Michigan United Way colleague Suzanne Moody read a poem about what it means to be a Human of CASA. Guests also heard from a CASA teen who wanted to share a piece of her story via a letter.

The evening was one of celebration and resolve, giving guests the opportunity to reflect on the success of the previous year and to help prepare for the work of the coming year. Together, the CASA community raised funds, awareness, and potential volunteers who will ensure the continuation of CASA’s mission for years to come.



Left, above, below:
Humans of CASA
pose for photos.
Photo Credit:
Charla Dee Photos



Right: Humans
of CASA panel
discusses the impact
of child advocacy.



Heart of CASA
Award Recipient
Heidi Hendricks
addresses guests.



Guests enjoy
Heart of CASA
program.



HUMANS OF CASA OF KENT COUNTY



Meet the Humans
of CASA:

Trudi
Huizenga

By Carrie Shoesmith



CASAKENTCO.ORG/HUMANS

Music has always been part of Trudi Huizenga’s life. It shaped her career, her outlook, and—perhaps most importantly—her service to others. For more than 22 years, Trudi has brought the same sense of harmony she once shared in the classroom to her volunteer work at CASA of Kent County, offering hope and care to children in need.

After retiring from Calvin College in 2003, Trudi came across a newspaper ad seeking CASA volunteers. The idea of advocating for children sparked her curiosity. She signed up for training and soon took on her first case—three siblings who needed individualized attention and consistency. Trudi found joy in spending time with each child, creating small moments of connection that echoed the harmony of her own happy upbringing.

When her case ended, Trudi realized that her aching knees would make it difficult to take on another. But she wasn’t ready to step away from CASA. Instead, she asked, “What else can I do for you?” This led her to a different rhythm of service—organizing, filing, and shredding confidential case documents. Though the work was quiet, it was deeply meaningful. As she handled each file, Trudi was reminded of the many children who needed care and advocacy. That awareness has kept her faithfully volunteering for more than two decades.

Trudi’s background in music and education mirrors her dedication to lifelong learning and service. She began as an elementary music teacher, later earning both her master’s and her Ph.D. in music. Her teaching career included an unforgettable year when she taught both kindergarten music in the morning and *Oedipus Rex* in the afternoon—a reflection of the wide range of human experience she now encounters through CASA.

Born and raised in Grand Rapids as one of eight children, Trudi remembers the moment she first realized not all childhoods were as joyful as hers. A classmate once drew a picture of his mother with tears on her face—a small but unforgettable image that awakened her empathy and sense of purpose.

Today, whether she’s helping at CASA or serving others through her church, Trudi continues to blend compassion and consistency—the same harmony she’s always carried—with the hope that every child might one day experience the safety and joy she knew growing up.

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 HER
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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- | | |
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KENT COUNTY

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CASA CONNECT WINTER 2025

INSIDE

Breaking the Cycle:
How Joe Helped Lenny Find Hope

Note from the Executive Director

**Upcoming Events for Current
Volunteers**

Serendipity Out West:
Meeting Another CASA

Heart of CASA 2025 Recap

Meet the Humans of CASA:
Trudi Huizenga