



Court Appointed Special Advocates
FOR CHILDREN

TULARE COUNTY

CASA Informed

Change a Child's Story™

CASA of Tulare County Newsletter Summer 2021

From the Acting Executive Director

The effects of COVID-19 on CASA have been dramatic and deeply felt. The pandemic has caused us to view our mission with fresh eyes and discover new ways to fulfill our goal of changing a child's story through advocacy. But there were some surprising and positive outcomes.



First, CASA maintained a consistent group of volunteer advocates who stayed the course, working with their assigned children who are in foster care. Instead of making home visits, they substituted text messaging, phone calls and Zoom visits.

It did not initially seem to be the most efficient way to work with these abused and neglected children who have learned not to trust adults in their lives. However, I have been amazed at the creativity of our staff, who developed ways to read books, have puppet shows, play a game of charades or do arts & crafts together—all using Internet technology.

Second, our training program for advocates went high tech. In the past, advocates learned in person how to work with children in foster care and how to write reports to the court. When California CASA ramped up a CASA University online, we found that training could be done just as efficiently virtually.

Finally, like most nonprofits, CASA took a hit when we had to cancel our two main fundraising events of 2020, our Superhero Run/Walk and the Once Upon A Dream gala, both of which have been rescheduled for this fall. We offered refunds for those who donated to those events, but nobody took us up, for which we were extremely grateful.

In addition, we have had a greater number of individual donors than in the past. It appears that generosity cannot be held back, even during a pandemic.

No child should have to go through a complicated court system alone, and all of us at CASA will make sure we continue to help them.

Alberto Ramos



CASA gala rescheduled for Sept. 10

It's time to dress up, get out and see your friends once more. Our Once Upon A Dream dinner by the Vintage Press and auction will give you that chance while helping CASA make up for lost fundraisers.

We need people to attend, to donate auction items and to be sponsors. You can do it all on our website: <https://one.bidpal.net/casa2021/welcome>



It's Fun Run time!

There's lots to enjoy at the 4th Annual Superhero Run: besides the 1 K and 5K walk/run, there will be carnival games, food, prizes and medals.

Register by July 31 before rates go up. Wear your favorite Superhero costume. Non-profits are invited to have a carnival booth. Consider being a sponsor.

Register and information at runsignup.com/casarun2021

Story from an advocate

CASA youth finds success with 'I can do anything' attitude

Amy (not her real name) has an early story typical of what you hear of children detained by the court system. A medically fragile infant, she was adopted as a baby, but when she was older a restraining order was issued against the mom. Amy bounced around from foster home to group home.

She sometimes runs away but stays in touch with her CASA advocate, Katy. Once when she ran away from a group home, Amy told her, "I feel like a puppy nobody wants."

Katy was assigned to her case just as Covid hit, so they only got to meet in person once during the first year. "She knew who I was because I was a teacher at her school. That helped her build trust with me, so we were fortunate to have that connection," said Katy.

During times when Amy is AWOL, Katy makes arrangements to get her schoolwork to her. When Amy's grandmother died, she asked Katy to go to the funeral with her.

"We were driving together one day. I asked her what she wanted to do. If you don't want to work at fast food or be a maid, you have to graduate from high school."

Happily, Amy has connected with a military academy. She is a leader there and in charge of creating the weekly announcement videos. She wants to go into the military.

"These kids often don't make good decisions," said Katy. "Amy had a chance to make a poor decision, to go somewhere she shouldn't. She ended up not doing it. We met with her social worker and told her, 'You made a good decision. What a big deal that is for you.'"



Because of her leadership abilities, Amy is part of the foster youth panel through the Tulare County Office of Education. Members speak to new volunteers at the end of each CASA advocate class.

"Amy is so easy to support. You want to root for her," said Katy. "She has an 'I can do anything' attitude."

New advocate class will have buddies

CASA of Tulare County is excited to announce the launch of a pilot program called Buddy To Buddy, that we hope will strengthen our outreach efforts and support our newest advocates.

The first class to participate will be the training class that begins July 19. Each advocate who completes the training will be assigned to a "buddy" to whom he or she can turn to for guidance, common questions, best practices and more.

The "buddy" is not intended to replace the advocate coordinator, but to provide additional support and a friendly ear during those first tentative weeks of advocacy.

The classes are also using a more indepth training system called CASA University, an online independent study program.

Previously, all training was done in person during face-to-face sessions, but social distancing requirements changed all of that. CASA University will be used virtually for this class and hopefully in-person for the fall class.

Through Zoom conferences, trainees can interact with their instructors, guest presenters and each other to discuss the material and get questions answered.

Progress is tracked virtually to ensure everyone is completing assignments and staying on track to become certified.

11 new advocates finish training, sworn in on Zoom, assigned first case



Congratulations to our new advocates!

Because of Covid, the spring advocate class was sworn in on Zoom by Judge Hugo Loza on June 16.

Congratulations to our new volunteers who will be taking their first cases with foster children. Pictured (from top left) are Araceli Espinosa and Jessica Robinson (CASA outreach/training coordinators), Judge Loza, Carl Lockridge, Alyssa Acosta, Tonya Pollard, Jennifer Orosco, Erin Rohner, Christine Everhart, Locey Rice, Priscilla Ordonez-Valdez, Noelle Lanpher, Samantha Mendoza and Jennifer Vahanian.

Hand-made dollhouse kicks off 'Once Upon A Dream' auction

Wouldn't your child or grandchild love this dollhouse? It was made by a retired advocate who put in over 400 hours making it during the pandemic isolation. The advocate, who wants to remain anonymous, has offered it as one of the live auction items for this year's gala.

"Building doll houses has been my hobby for many years," she said "This Painted Lady kit from Real Good Toys was my first kit. The others were custom-made dollhouses. I applied the shingles — approximately 1,200 of them — one at a time using Liquid Nails."

And the donation brings up some interesting history. The gala actually began as a playhouse auction. Former CASA director Robin Melton talked to some contractors, asking them to donate playhouses for CASA to auction off.

"There were probably six or seven of them," remembers former CASA staff member Beth Wilshire. "Some of them had a theme. I remember one that had a Pink Panther theme. The auction was held at the food court at the Visalia Mall in those days, and they brought in the playhouses for everyone to look at."

Joan Carpenter, who along with husband Mike built the current CASA office, remembers that one year they commissioned Galen Pfeiffer to donate a playhouse for the fundraiser.

"Galen was the contractor who built the CASA office for us. Mike and I bid on and won the playhouse, which was constructed in our backyard."

The next CASA executive director, Marilyn Barr, moved the gala to the country club, and the playhouses could no longer be brought in. Eventually the auction evolved into what it is today, with many intriguing items to bid on — including this beautiful dollhouse.



The dollhouse, a Victorian Painted Lady model, measures 30 inches wide, 43 inches high and 22 inches long. It is completely unfurnished now, a delight for any aspiring dollhouse decorator. It is 1:12 scale, meaning that one inch is equal to 12 inches, or one foot.

Foster kids learn something about love and holding hands

CASA advocates Jessica and Brent Robinson are one of three married couples taking cases together. They really surprised their family of six foster children



when the teens caught the grown-ups holding hands.

The children were very suspicious of the couple at first. "They gave us ugly looks when we first arrived," said Jessica, "but they have wonderful foster parents, and they helped us break the ice."

It took a long time for

the teens to trust the Robinsons. They couldn't believe that the advocates would visit and take them places without being paid.

On their outings with the kids, the couple held hands when they were driving in the car. It's just something they do. When the teens saw that, they couldn't believe it. "Is that normal," they asked?

"Yes, we explained, that we love and respect each other, and that's how we show it," said Jessica. "They were not used to that. They were shocked that a married couple could be that way."

It was a real moment of revelation for children who had probably never seen that kind of tenderness. And just one way that CASAs make a difference.

Blanket Ladies help provide soft comfort for CASA kids in foster care

Often children don't have much when they are removed to foster homes. But the Blanket Ladies make it easier by making blankets, totes, diaper bags, baby layette sets and Christmas stockings, donating hundreds of them to CASA each year.

And they don't donate just to CASA. They provide these goods to 24 agencies, mostly for children but also for veterans, women's shelters, homeless, those receiving cancer treatment and special education classes.

During Covid, they changed gears a bit and made over 3,000 masks for nurses, but still managed to make well over 6,000 items during 2020.

The women sew every week, are very organized and use every scrap of material they receive through grants and donations.

On the blankets made for CASA, they add a strip that says "Made with Love" with a place for the child's name. That way if the child is moved to different foster homes (which happens often) they can be sure to take their blanket with them.

Thanks to Mary Jayne Yada, a former CASA advocate who connected the group to CASA, and all the other blanket ladies who help CASA kids.

Pictured is Mary Jayne (standing) with the Blanket Ladies' assembly line stations at the home of Sandy Blain.



What's new at CASA

College scholarship

Pediatrician Preeti Verma has created a scholarship for a foster youth going on to college. Dr. Verma, a CASA board member, is naming the scholarship in honor of her mother, the late Prem Lata.

"My mother was a very caring person. Anyone who went to her with a request was never disappointed. People touched her feet as a greeting, which in our Indian culture is the highest form of respect," said Dr. Preeti.

The \$2,000 scholarship will be given to a CASA youth each year until the youth finishes college. Then it will be given to another youth.

Learning about the land

CASA of Tulare County is looking forward to a unique opportunity to share with some of our kiddos in 6th-8th grades, courtesy of the Sequoia Riverlands Trust.

The SRT is dedicated to protecting and preserving the natural lands that surround us as well as educating the public about its conservation efforts. The SRT staff has reserved two mornings, one in October and another in December, to share the fun and beauty of the outdoors with CASA kids.

Art classes

Art is shown to be beneficial in so many ways. The creative process relieves burdensome stress, encourages creative thinking, boosts self-esteem and provides a sense of accomplishment.

To provide these benefits to CASA kids, CASA is partnering with the Arts Consortium, the arts council for Tulare County, to provide monthly acrylic classes. Starting July 28 from 4-6 p.m., advocates can bring their CASA kids to the office to participate. The Arts Consortium will provide all supplies.

Meet our interns

CASA of Tulare County is pleased to have Alex Chavez Serrano and Jose Iniguez as interns in our Visalia office. Alex is currently enrolled at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, MD, pursuing a bachelor's degree in international studies. He hopes to graduate in 2022.

Jose is working on his B.A. in social work at Fresno Pacific University.

Both are interested in working with vulnerable children and want to learn more about how CASA does that.
