

# CASA Notes

Volume 1, Issue 3

## COURT APPOINTED SPECIAL ADVOCATES OF MERCED COUNTY

A Member of the National CASA Association

Summer/Fall 2013

## CASA Of Merced: Serving the Children of Merced County

### The issue:

Each year, approximately 660,000 children experience foster care in America. They are often separated from their siblings and caught up in a confusing and complicated system of social workers, foster homes, courts, service agencies and state child welfare departments. And, sadly, most of them must do the best they can to navigate this complex world without a dependable, consistent adult presence to help.

### The solution: A CASA volunteer for every child

CASA helps these children by recruiting and training volunteers to watch over and advocate for abused and neglected children. They make sure children don't get lost in the overburdened legal and social service systems or languish in inappropriate group or foster homes. Volunteers stay with each case until it is closed and the child is placed in a safe, permanent home.

Often this means reunifying with birth parents once their safety is assured. For

many abused and neglected children, their volunteer advocate will be the one constant adult presence in their lives. However, since the demand is so great, CASA volunteers are only assigned to the most difficult cases, leaving the needs of tens of thousands unmet.



### How You Can Help

You can help end the cycle of abuse and neglect for the foster children in Merced County by supporting CASA of Merced County's efforts to recruit and train volunteers.

Give a voice to a child in need. Be *for the child*. It's easy:

**Donate** to help recruit and train a volunteer advocate for a child.

**Volunteer** yourself.

**Spread the word** to someone you know.

There are so many ways to help reach the goal of serving every child.

### Please join us for our annual west side fundraiser!



CASA of Merced County presents the *Harvest of Hope* **October 12, 2013** *Los Banos Community Center*

Today, hundreds of abused and neglected foster children in Merced County are waiting for an Advocate. Please partner with us and help make a life-changing difference for these children and youth.

All funds raised will be utilized for training and supporting additional CASA advocates. Call 722-2272 for tickets.



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Every child deserves a safe, permanent home.  
**Be for the child.**

**Donate Today**



## MESSAGE FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

SHAR HERRERA

Last week I was talking with a small group of people about CASA and one of them asked, “Does a CASA Advocate really make a difference?”

This is a great question, but an easy one to answer with a resounding YES! Every week Advocates come into our office and share their stories about the work they are doing with the foster children assigned to them. These stories are priceless and some even bring tears of joy to the eyes of those listening.

We are often surprised at the lack of experiences these children have had, such as a birthday celebration or shopping for school clothes. Not only can an Advocate provide some of these experiences, they also make sure that



the child receives the services they need in order to be successful.

What do our Advocates do with their CASA child?

- Play a board game
- Watch a movie
- Share a meal
- Work on a scrapbook
- Go shopping for school clothes with money donated by a CASA supporter
- Assist the foster parent with school registration
- Help a youth prepare for their move to a university—including finding furniture, etc. for their apartment
- Celebrate a birthday.

An Advocate gets to know the child or youth and makes recommendations to the Court.

Numerous research studies report that a child with a CASA volunteer is:

- \* More likely to find a safe, permanent home,

- \* Likely to get more help while in the system,
- \* More likely to have a consistent, responsible adult presence,
- \* Likely to spend less time in foster care,
- \* Less likely to be bounced from home to home, and
- \* More likely to do better in school.



So, YES, a CASA does make a difference in the life of a foster child.

If you would like more information on becoming an Advocate, please call our office at 722-2272. We have over 40 children on our waiting list.

## SPOTLIGHT ON AN ADVOCATE: BY MARGE SADLER



“Knowing ‘our kids’ are in a safe, sound place and thriving; seeing them overcoming shyness and beginning to develop a sense of trust” is the most rewarding part of being a CASA, according to Claudia Kalmin. A graduate of the third training class, Claudia is half of Merced CASA’s first co-CASA team. She says she and Kim McAuley work very well together, and is amazed at how often they are emailing the same thoughts to each other. Claudia and Kim are working with three severely deprived siblings who, fortunately, are placed together. Claudia is a willing volunteer for any task that needs accomplishing and serves as a peer coordinator for five other advocates. She is especially appreciative of the support and helpfulness of everyone involved with Merced County CASA and treasures the new friendships she’s made. She’s amazed that so many quality volunteers are willing to make foster children a part of their lives and hopes there will always be many more.

Claudia and her twin sister Kris were born at Children’s Hospital in Oakland

and raised in Berkeley. Claudia is proud that her high school is still in existence—as it is the only one in Berkeley, CA. (Go Yellow Jackets!) She earned her Bachelor’s Degree in communications and humanities from North Park University in Chicago. Returning to California, she received a scholarship for addiction studies from the juvenile justice system. She led groups in schools for children affected by the substance abuse of others. Her work soon expanded to include groups for children experiencing grief and those whose parents were divorcing. She taught kindergarten four days a week at the same time she was doing the group counseling. She went back to school at St. Mary’s to earn her administrative credential, dreaming of being in a position to develop and run programs that would benefit children—getting the programs to the point she could step back and watch them succeed and grow.

Retiring after thirty-nine years in education, Claudia welcomed the next

chapter of her life: wife to Al, who’s an elementary school teacher; stepmom to Al’s two grown sons; moving to Merced; and enjoying new friendships. Like many retirees, Claudia says she’s busier now than she was when she was working. In addition to her work with CASA, she serves on the Youth Accountability Board and on her church’s council and hospitality committee. She volunteers for the Food Pantry and helps with her husband’s classroom. She’s a knitter, a quilter, a gardener, a reader, and a traveler. She admits to “stealing a few minutes whenever she can” to play Candy Crush, saying she now understands how addictive video games can be. Plans for the future include finishing all the quilts she has in varying stages of completion, returning to Paris, and spending lots of time with family—including future grandchildren.

## MESSAGE FROM THE BOARD PRESIDENT

NANCY YOUNG-BERGMAN

*If you want to touch the past, touch a rock. If you want to touch the present, touch a flower. If you want to touch the future, touch a life. ~Author Unknown*

It is difficult for most of us to imagine the life of a foster youth. Whereas most of us grew up with the security and confidence that our parents would always be by our sides to support and protect us, the lives of our foster youth are rarely as fortunate. Often as a result of abuse, neglect or abandonment, these children may suddenly find themselves in a new, unfamiliar and perhaps even frightening world. Through no fault of their own, foster children may be removed from the very people who should be loving and protecting them: their parents.

Merced County is facing extraordinary challenges as a result of the extremely high number of youth who continue to enter our overburdened foster care system each day. These children are true victims and they desperately need each one of us to touch their lives and to provide the love, compassion and hope that there truly is a better

tomorrow for them.

Since our beginning in 2010, CASA of Merced County has continued to grow and to recruit outstanding volunteer CASA Advocates who are highly trained to listen to the unique and often troubling concerns of our foster youth, to understand and interpret their needs to the Court and to recommend the services that will best address those needs. However, we need many more Advocates to assist these children who are in great need of our help. Although our Merced County social workers and judges are working diligently to support our foster youth, their caseloads are overwhelming and far exceed those of other California Counties.

One of the major goals of CASA of Merced County is to provide additional support and attention to the children who need us, and in order to accomplish that, we need help from our community and we especially need help from YOU!

*If you want to touch the future, touch a life.*

*Author Unknown*

Please support CASA either by giving your valuable time and love as a CASA Advocate or by donating to this amazing cause. We all know that our children are our future and it is essential that we continue to provide this strong and compassionate group of CASA Advocates to guide and protect our foster children throughout Merced County. Please join us to improve the lives of our foster youth!



## A VOICE FOR A CHILD

(Due to confidentiality, names have been changed) By Diane Butts

Shortly before Thanksgiving, a CASA advocate stopped by an elementary school to make her initial introduction. She presented the Order to Appoint to the office secretary, and asked if she could arrange a meeting with the child's teacher. She was informed that the child had just been airlifted to the trauma center at UC Davis Medical Center, following a fall from the jungle gym. The foster mother had been called and was outside talking on the phone to the FFA social worker, asking for help in transportation. Since the CASA was available, she stepped in and transported the foster mother to the facility and back home that night.

During the trip, telephone calls

came in from the trauma center. The child had arrived and was resting comfortably. However, because she was unaccompanied by a legal caregiver, no procedures could begin without written permission from the county, or proof of appointment. The foster mother's primary language was Spanish and some medical terminology was unclear to her on the phone. The CASA was able to intercede with ER personnel and answer health history questions. The foster mother and CASA remained at the hospital until the biological mother arrived around 8 that night.

Participation and supervision by a CASA in this situation made a difference in this child's life. It per-

mitted the medical team to proceed sooner in treating their patient with pertinent health information. It allowed firsthand information to be given to the social worker. And it paved a close working relationship between CASA and foster family.



## COURT APPOINTED SPECIAL ADVOCATES OF MERCED COUNTY

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See our website:  
[MercedCASA.org](http://MercedCASA.org)

### OUR MISSION

*Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) of Merced County advocates for the best interests of abused and neglected children and non-minor dependents within the court system. Based on the belief that every child is entitled to a safe and supportive home, CASA works through trained volunteers in collaboration with key agencies, legal counsel, and community resources to serve as the child's advocate in the Merced County Juvenile Court System.*

## FAMILY CONNECTIONS

The Family Connections program within CASA of Merced County has expanded. We now have a new Family Connections Specialist to assist in our efforts to find and engage family members in the lives of foster youth. After wrapping up training and finalizing a few of the first cases, we are now ready to take on more referrals. Currently there are 6 cases being finalized and 2 new referrals being processed.

Our Family Connections program strives to connect youth with their family so that they can build strong, life-long connections and a positive support network. This past year we have been able to re-connect 8 children/youth with almost 60 family members or friends. In one of these cases a 15 year old boy was returned home to live with his dad. Although family maintenance is still in progress, we are continuing to pro-

vide connections that will help them be successful. A Lifebook, complete with pictures and stories from his past, was created by the team and presented to the youth. He was so excited to see what had been done just for him!

Family Connections and the CASA Advocate worked together to provide the support needed in order to make the reunification a success.

**FC makes a difference!**



***"Family is not always blood. It is the people in your life who want you in theirs. The ones who accept you for who you are. The ones who would do anything to see you smile and who love you no matter what."***  
-Unknown Author

## We want to say **THANK YOU** to our **CASA Volunteers:**

Paula Albertson  
Karolyn Alvarez  
Marina Botelho  
Jan Bradley  
Diane Butts  
Jalisa Chambers  
Marcie Correa  
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Lynda Dyas  
Wendy Eagle  
Ruben Fuentes  
Francisco Guzman  
Angela Ivani  
Diane Jenkin  
Torrin Johnson  
Debbi Johnston  
Veda Jones  
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Kirsten Shulley  
LaDenta Smith  
Megan Smith  
Bettie Stephens  
Lori Ward  
Brynn Wolcott  
Deborah Workman

**They are making a  
difference ...  
one child at a time!**



**WE NEED YOU!**

**Advocate Training is offered  
three times a year.**

**Call today to reserve your  
spot.**

**722-2272**