

# CASA Notes

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A Member of the National CASA Association

## CASA of Merced County

### A VOICE FOR A CHILD

There is this girl, we will call "Charlotte." She started her journey in foster care at the age of five with her half-brother, "Darrin." While Darrin was reunified with his biological father, Charlotte had no one, and was placed in a long-term foster home where the foster parents eventually obtained guardianship.

During her seven-year journey in this foster home, Charlotte became ill and needed an organ transplant. Due to her illness, Charlotte experienced a period of time where she wasn't making good decisions. Consequently, school and home life became very uncomfortable and Charlotte decided to leave her foster home because she didn't feel like she fit in anymore. Her social worker told her that if she

wanted to leave then she would have to fill out a JV120. So, Charlotte filled out the form with the help of her foster mother and they filed it with the court. Sweet Charlotte, once again, had no one and she was VERY sick. She spent three weeks in a Madera group home when the call from Stanford came, and she was told that there was an available organ.

Michelle, a CASA volunteer, was assigned to Charlotte. The two met for the first time the day before her transplant and it was an immediate bond. During the five weeks that Charlotte was at Stanford, Michelle coordinated with the social workers to ensure that there was someone with Charlotte every day. This meant that Michelle was making the trip to Palo Alto up to four times a week. As Charlotte became stronger she was

released from the hospital and placed in a temporary Palo Alto foster home for ninety days.

On the day of a Review Hearing in court, the unexpected happened. Charlotte's biological family, who lives in Winton, was in court. They had received a letter about the court date and wanted to find out what was going on with Charlotte. Michelle met the family outside the courtroom and discovered that the family thought that Charlotte had been adopted seven years ago. The great news was that they wanted her back into their family.

Sweet Charlotte went to live with her family upon returning to Merced County and is transitioning, at home and school, beautifully. Charlotte is currently in a six-month waiting period with her family, who has every intent of adopting her.



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What does my CASA mean to me?

I have a lot to say about her. She is the most wonderful person I've ever met in my life. I never had a person like her. She is different than the others. She is caring, understanding, lovable, fun, honest, and trusted. One thing I love about her is her laugh. It makes me smile all the time and she is very helpful to my family. I want her to be with me forever because she is part of my family and if I lose her I have no one to be with and if I have kids I want her to be there so that she can hold the baby. I don't know what I would do without her. That's how special she is to me and my family. I love her so much. She is a part of my life. She means a lot to me and my family. Well that's all the things I have to say about her.

What might you mean to a child?

### Spotlight on an advocate

Stephanie was born and raised in Merced. She has one brother and two half-sisters, one of whom is 21 years younger! Steph was actively involved in color guard at Golden Valley High School. In her senior year of high school, she started coaching at Cruickshank Middle School. She went on to coach there for 15 years.

Dance and color guard are two of her passions. One week before her graduation from CSU Stanislaus, she woke up with tingling toes and back pain. Within a week, she was paralyzed from the chest down. She had a spinal cord injury due to Transverse Myelitis. It derailed her plans, but she has worked on being more active in our community



and her career.

Besides working as a CASA she also works full time for the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation. She has always been interested in the foster care system. Steph became a foster mom in 2010 and adopted the child in 2011. Her daughter, Rebecca, is 22 years old and lives in Tennessee with her husband. She will be joining the US Army soon.

A memorable time for Steph as a CASA was one day her CASA youth called because she needed advice. Steph knows she could have called her sister



or a friend, but she chose to call Steph. Steph says, "I was excited to know that she trusts me and values my advice!"

The advice Steph would give to a new advocate is the same advice she received – be patient! It will be a little awkward at first, but in time you'll become more comfortable and confident. Stephanie's CASA kiddo is a non-minor dependent now, but she still relies on Stephanie's advice.

Steph thinks CASA is important because CASA provides someone who is on the foster child's side. Our job is to be the voice of the child. We are there to

determine what is in their best interest. We also can be a mentor to them, someone they can count on and trust when there might not be anyone in their lives they can depend on.

SAVE THE DATE      SAVE THE DATE      SAVE THE DATE  
September 17, 2016      CASA Casino Night      at Los Banos O'Banion Auditorium



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### JOIN



CASA relies on individual and corporate volunteers and financial partners to make its work possible. Financial support is needed to recruit, train and supervise advocates. Our **VOICES4CASA** are asked to support the organization with an annual donation. We welcome all support, including volunteers who can donate time for even just a few hours throughout the year. Join the current group of 143 **VOICES4CASA**.

Call our office or go to [www.MercedCASA.org](http://www.MercedCASA.org)

You can help make a difference!

### Message from the Executive Director by Shar Herrera

Back-to-school is an exciting time for students as they anticipate seeing friends again and begin a new year. However, for children in foster care who often change schools multiple times, there is little excitement to be had when you don't know if you'll be in the same school next week, next month, next year. It is estimated that by the time a foster child ages out of the system, over one third will have changed schools five or more times. This likely contributes to a disheartening statistic: only half of young people in foster care complete high

school by age 18.

With each school move, a foster child has to start all over: make friends, navigate classroom dynamics, and adjust to a new environment. These moves result in setbacks—children in foster care are estimated to lose up to 6 months of academic progress with each move, causing them to fall behind and, later, decreasing the chances they will graduate from high school, a predictor of later success in life.

Thankfully, there are everyday citizens in our community who are helping to keep foster children

in the same school longer and secure the educational resources the children need to make academic progress. These CASA volunteers interact with the adults in the child's life – teachers, counselors, foster parents, and professionals working on the child's case – and make recommendations to Juvenile Court judges that are in the child's best interests.

This new school year, we at CASA of Merced County ask that caring community members come forward and become CASA volunteers. It only takes a few hours a month to help a foster child. Please spread the word: There are over 450 Merced County foster children who need a CASA.

**Be the difference for a child in foster care!**

### Message from the Board President by Mary Miller

From the time we moved here, only a short ten years ago, I have been impressed by the generosity of the members of this community, people who give so willingly of their time and resources. They include every ethnicity and every age group, ranging from children to elderly. They include the selfless CASAs who contribute their time, energy, talents and emotions to helping our foster children. I am impressed by those in service clubs, who so often devote their efforts to helping others here and around the world. And those numerous individuals who serve on all the volunteer boards and similar activities throughout the county, dedicated to meeting the needs of others.

I want to mention particularly four individuals who exemplify the generosity, selflessness and giving spirit of this community. Lee and Ann Anderson recently made a substantial financial contribution to

CASA to honor Gaye and Curtis Riggs for their service to the community. Well deserved, for Gaye and Curtis are truly among our most generous members, with both their time and resources. They serve on numerous boards, are members of service organizations, open their home for fundraising for various organizations, and give generously of their financial resources. However, Lee and Ann Anderson fall into this same category. They belong to several volunteer organizations, serve on numerous boards, donate time and resources generously, attend most fundraisers, and are devoted to the well-being of this community. CASA is honored and fortunate to be beneficiaries of the generosity of both of these remarkable families. And CASA is especially blessed that Gaye Riggs shares her wisdom and counsel as a member of its Board of Directors.

I also want to take this opportunity to reinforce my statement above that even children

are inspired to contribute. Two separate instances are particularly noteworthy. The young daughter of Vic and Priya Lakireddy, Siya, took the opportunity on two family occasions to solicit money from family and friends to benefit CASA. And recently a group of neighborhood children, Eric & Erin Hamm, Brad & Jenni Samuelson, and Charles & Emily Langdon, made crafts and snacks to sell in their yard to raise money for CASA. They initiated these efforts on their own. As I consider these children and their efforts, it gives me comfort that the future will be in good hands.

**All children need love, guidance, inspiration and support. Some receive it from their families. Others receive it from CASA Advocates. Some do not receive it. They need our help. That's why we need to continue to seek new Advocates. You might be one who will make a difference for a child.**

**I am for the child™**



Lift up a child's voice.  
 A child's life.™