



CASA of Kent County Presents



Building a Foundation for Advocacy & Success

The CASA Spotlight: A Closer Look at Someone Making a World of Difference

At CASA, people are at the heart of our work and the core of our success. This space is dedicated to highlighting one of the many members of the CASA volunteer family who make our organization and community better through their dedicated service.

In 1994, Gary Pritchard was a teacher in a special-needs classroom at Campau Elementary School. In December that year, 9-year-old Ricky became his student. The boy and his mother had been living in Detroit and had recently driven to Grand Rapids. Here, they lived in their car. Ricky went to school every day; his mother went in search of drugs.

Gary said, "Ricky became my mission. I had special-needs students, but Ricky's needs were so much greater." Gary began doing extra, small things for Ricky. When Social Services intervened and moved Ricky into his aunt's home, Gary continued the relationship. He stayed in touch; he even took Ricky along on a trip with his nephew to Washington D.C. "I just wanted him to experience 'normal,'" Gary said.

Gary was among the first to learn that Ricky was being returned to his mother. Ricky was 12. "We lost touch then," Gary recalled.

It was four years before Gary saw Ricky again: this time, on the front page of the *Grand Rapids Press*. The boy had been arrested and charged with murder. He'd killed a man over a few ounces of marijuana.

Gary was devastated and angry. "I understand, and I understood then, that social workers are overburdened, but I could never understand why they returned Ricky to his mother to begin with. It seemed like that boy never really had a chance."

Gary sat that day in 2000, thumbing through the rest of his newspaper, absorbing the facts. Then, in what can only be called uncanny serendipity, he chanced on an article about CASA of Kent County in the same edition of the *Press*.

He applied to be a CASA volunteer the next day. Eleven years and 18 children later, he remains a committed advocate for children made wards for abuse and neglect. For Ricky.

CASA training gave Gary more authority to do what was right



Name: Gary Pritchard
Years with CASA: 11
Families served: 7
Children served: 18

"A CASA volunteer is assigned to a case at the judge's request, so you have the power of the court behind you."

for kids than he'd ever had as a teacher. "A CASA volunteer is assigned to a case at the judge's request, so you have the power of the court behind you. We can request and be given medical records, school records, and other documents. That way, we are able to gather facts and evidence to support or eliminate what would otherwise be an intuitive sense of what's really going on with a child."

That intuition came into play in Gary's first CASA case. Three children had been removed from their home when authorities suspected that their father was sexually abusing the little girl. Gary was assigned to work with the two boys, who had both been placed in the same foster home. "I was shocked by the treatment the boys received in their foster home," Gary said. "They and the other foster kids in the home were made to eat in a separate room from the family. They were all treated like second-class; it was clear that they were there simply to provide income for the family." Gary investigated and, ultimately, insisted that the boys be removed from the foster home and placed elsewhere. "Turns out," Gary said, "That one of the other foster children in that home ended up pregnant by one of the foster family's sons."

Gary is quick to assure that most foster families are nothing like the first one he worked with. More recently, in fact, Gary had a case in which three children, ages 4, 6, and 9, were placed with a

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Our Mission: *CASA of Kent County provides highly trained volunteers to advocate in the best interest of abused and neglected children in family court proceedings.*

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foster family who lived less than three miles from his home. "Their birth mom really couldn't take care of them, but she was fighting the courts," Gary said. "Eventually, when it was clear that they had the evidence they needed to take the kids away, she gave up. The kids were adopted by relatives." Gary has since stayed in touch with the foster family who receive regular updates on the children. "This was a good ending," Gary said. "I wish they all turned out so well."

He's philosophical about the ones that don't. Gary said, "It's sort of like being a teacher. You know you won't reach them all, but you hope you give them enough, and that someone else, down the line, will reach them, save them."

"It's CASA's mission to make sure that kids have a voice in court. Every CASA volunteer wants the best resolution possible. We aren't out to take jobs from social service workers or attorneys or foster parents. We're there to speak up for the kids when adults are deciding their futures."

Gary said, "It's scary. There are children on the waiting list for a CASA assignment now. They are the ones the judges refer as needing our help the most. But they're just a fraction of the number of kids who are wards of the court for abuse and neglect. Worse, the kids who are wards of the court are just a fraction of the kids out there who are abused or neglected."

Though Gary anticipates taking a brief break when his current case ends, he is likely to come back to CASA – because so many children need a CASA. And, because of Ricky.

Each year Kent County CASA volunteers donate more than 9,000 hours of service.

Get Involved! Volunteer

Please submit your application to become a CASA volunteer by January 2, 2012. The next scheduled training is January 16, 2012.

Applications are available at www.casakentco.org/volunteer/ or call our office at 616.632.5311 for more information.

A heartfelt thank you & congratulations to Judge Nanaruth Carpenter

Judge Carpenter has been instrumental in establishing and growing CASA, and has remained an outspoken supporter of our program. She is retiring this year after more than 21 years on the bench. When CASA volunteers have spoken for children, Judge Carpenter has listened. For that, we – and the hundreds of children the Judge has helped – honor her.

Meet Friends of CASA

Friends of CASA is a new group composed of volunteers who support CASA and our mission. Members are passionate about children and their well being, and are dedicated to making a difference for CASA's children. Friends of CASA will create awareness, advocate for families and children at the state level, and support our fundraising and recruiting efforts. For more information, please email: Friends.of.CASA.KentCo@gmail.com



The cost to provide a year of service for a single child is \$1,000.

Welfare Reform

On October 1, 2011, an estimated 25,000 children in Michigan were placed at an even higher risk of becoming wards of the court.

Michigan's welfare reform bills 4409 and 4410 ended cash assistance to adults who had, cumulatively over their lifetimes, received four years of such assistance. Most often adults used these benefits to pay rent and utilities. If or when an affected adult becomes homeless or has their heat or electricity shut off, their children will likely be deemed "neglected," and therefore become candidates for intervention by Child Protective Services.

Kent County family court judges are concerned. Judge Paul Denenfeld said, "In these difficult budget times, hard choices have to be made. As a judge who hears family cases day after day, however, I fear that putting a lifetime limit on certain welfare benefits will hurt children whose parents are actively looking for work in a terrible job market. These kinds of cuts may hurt children far more than adults."

Regardless of differences of opinion about reform measures or predictions of outcomes from their enactment, all residents of Michigan can agree that we cannot stand by while 25,000 children fall into homelessness or cold or darkness. Nor can we set them adrift into the child welfare system without ongoing support and individual, caring attention. The need for CASA volunteers has never been greater.

Welcome Our New CASA Board Member, Andy Rent



New board member, Andy Rent, acts as MC for CASA's 2011 annual House Party.

Andy Rent was trying to cut back. His terms on two boards of directors were ending and he didn't plan to replace the commitments. Then Geri Pasi, a friend of Rent's wife and a CASA board member, called. She asked him to consider serving on CASA's board. When he received the call last year, Rent had never heard of CASA of Kent County. By the time he finished exploring the organization's mission and work, he could no longer say no. Within a month, Rent was serving on a communications subcommittee of the board; earlier this summer he became one of two new CASA board members (with Tony Grossa, who will be introduced in the next issue of Home Pages).

Rent and his wife have seven children who have developed into successful adults. He said, "I want these CASA kids to have someone to help them become successful. I have a real passion for kids' issues, but especially for these kids, who are in trouble through no fault of their own."

Rent, a television/radio host, plans to use his skills to help bring the message of CASA to the public. "Sometimes I think people want to turn a deaf ear to sad stories. They don't want to hear about things that make them feel bad. But in this case, I hope the stories inspire them to want to take action, to become a volunteer or a supporter."

"This is one of those nonprofit organizations that we're not ever going to be able to put out of business," he said. "But at least we can have the goal of making sure that every child who needs a CASA has one."

House Party 2011: An Evening Under the Tuscan Sky

We hope you were one of the 125 people who attended CASA's 2011 House Party at the home of Jim and Dalene Abbott on September 15. Those who joined us heard from Judge Christopher P. Yates who reiterated how grateful he and the other six Kent County family court judges are for CASA and, especially, for our volunteer advocates.

Judges rely on the information that Court Appointed Special Advocates provide – insights they would not get from attorneys, social workers, foster care workers, or teachers – information that judges often read before professional reports or pleas. He told us that sadly, the number of children made wards of the court in the past year has increased, and that we should anticipate the waiting list for advocates to continue to grow in the coming year. House party guests responded with more than \$28,000 in donations. We thank them so much for their support! That's at least 28 additional children who will have an advocate in family court in 2012. As Judge Yates testified – CASA, its volunteers, and its supporters truly make a difference!

Right: Judge Christopher P. Yates explains the role of CASA volunteers in his court room and the vital role they play in his judgements.



Bottom: Guests enjoyed Tuscan-themed delicacies, including a tiramisu preparation demonstration.



Below: Marion Haight (with Gary Pritchard) shares her life-changing experiences as an advocate to nine families over the past ten years.



Damian Lochart, board vice president, explains CASA's mission with first time attendees of the event.



Guests look on as Patty Sabin talks about the need for additional volunteers due to the increased numbers of children waiting for advocates.



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CASA
Court Appointed Special Advocates
FOR CHILDREN



"Our volunteers are the heart and soul of this organization."

- Patty Sabin, CASA of Kent County Executive Director

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Thank You to Our Community Partners!

Baldwin Foundation
Kent County
National CASA
Rotary East
Schmidlapp Foundation
Sebastian Foundation
State of Michigan
United Way

Kindly Remember CASA in Your Holiday Giving Plan

It costs just \$1,000 per year to give a single child a voice in court proceedings that determine where and with whom the child will live, where she'll go to school, or how much contact he'll have with his siblings. Please remember children who are wards of the court for abuse or neglect in your year-end giving. Give them a voice by giving to CASA of Kent County.

Also, if you have extra tickets/passes for volunteer/child outings to such places or events as the Children's Museum, the Public and Art Museums, Meijer Gardens, John Ball Park Zoo, movie theatres, or theatre presentations, please consider donating them to CASA.



ALERT

Though CASA continues to grow, so does the number of children who are made wards of the court for abuse and neglect. **Today our waiting list for children with the greatest need for an advocate reached 87 – the highest number in our history.**

Have a Happy Holiday; Give a Happy Holiday

Looking for a unique gift to give family, friends or employees? We have CASA bracelets, lanyards, magnets, clothing, and more. Order yours today:

Bracelets	\$14	Lanyards	\$12
Watches	\$25	Magnets	\$5
Zippered Sweatshirts	\$26	Hooded Sweatshirts	\$24
Crew Sweatshirts	\$22	Bags	\$20

To purchase, contact Deb Kammer at 616.632.5161 or deb.kammer@kentcountymi.gov



Top: Lanyard
Left: Charm bracelet