



Court Appointed Special Advocates  
FOR CHILDREN

ALLEGHENY COUNTY

CASA of allegheny county

newsletter *Winter 2011*



*celebrating over 15 years of service to children*

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## Superheroes Do Exist

By: Daren A. Ellerbee, M.S.

Have you ever wished to be a kid again – believing in superheroes and fairytales? The reality of being an adult isn't that you're too old to believe, it's just that adults know all too well the reality of life – that fairytales don't come true for all children, especially those in the child welfare system.

Children are special because they have an innocence and optimism that once taken away can be lost forever. CASA & the Superhero Foundation has partnered to ensure that abused and neglected children involved within the system regain and maintain their innocence and know that fairytales do come true – that superheroes do exist.

*“Every child needs a hero but abused children need superheroes.”*

During Child Abuse Prevention & Awareness Month, the Texas based Superhero Foundation is sponsoring the 3rd Annual Pittsburgh Superhero 5K Run and 1K Family Run sponsored by FedEx Ground on Saturday, April 30, 2011 at the North Park Boat House.

What makes this race so special? Runners have the option to dress up as their favorite superheroes, which adds to the fun! All proceeds from this family-friendly event will go directly to the Court Appointed Special Advocates [CASA] of Allegheny County.

Registration: The early bird registration fee, if paid before April 1st is \$20 for adults and \$10 for children 15 years of age or younger. Kids 5 and under are free! Early bird registrants are guaranteed a t-shirt and each registration comes with 2 raffle tickets! After April 1st fees increase by only \$5.

Ronald McDonald will kick off the 1K Family Run/Walk at 9 a.m. Every child that crosses the finish line will get a prize. The first 400 child registrants will also get a superhero Silly Bandz! Robert Croak, the owner and founder of Silly Bandz will be there with his dog Stella to sign autographs! The 5k run will immediately begin following the Family Run.

If the only thing you feel like running is your mouth, you can still support CASA of Allegheny County and enjoy a good meal at the same time! On April 29, 2011 between 5 and 7PM, the Spaghetti Warehouse is donating 10% of all sales to The Superhero Foundation. So bring your whole family to this dinner; a yummy alternative to running the race.

To register for the race online please visit  
<http://www.active.com/running/allison-park-pa/pittsburgh-superhero-run-2011>  
or contact Erica Burg at [erica@thesuperherofoundation.org](mailto:erica@thesuperherofoundation.org).

## CASA Steelers Tailgate Party

The Fourth Annual CASA Steelers Tailgate Party was held on Thursday, October 28 at Heinz Field. Joining us for the event was Honorary Chair Mike Wallace and teammates Charlie Batch, Emmanuel Sanders, Byron Leftwich, Keyaron Fox, Isaac Redman, Antwaan Randle El, David Johnson, and Antonio Brown. Attendees were able to meet the players, secure their autographs and bid on a number of autographed game day jerseys. The evening helped CASA raise over \$30,000 that will directly help our organization advocate for more abused and neglected children in our community. Thank you to Mike Wallace, Bruce and Chris Arians and the entire Pittsburgh Steelers organization for their continued dedication to CASA and the children we serve.



# volunteer spotlight

## JULY 2010

### Eileen Roberts

Eileen Roberts was sworn in as a CASA volunteer as a member of CASA Class 17 in April 2002. Beginning in May 2002, she advocated for a family with two children, whose cases closed in 2004 and 2006. In addition, she took on a second case, advocating for three children, one of whom remained court active for four years, until reaching the age of 18. Eileen took a break from being a CASA for a few years, and recently accepted the challenge of advocating for her third case involving a young man with a complex and multi-layered history. We appreciate all our CASAs, and those who have agreed to continue to advocate for additional families over the years are priceless. Congratulations Eileen for your recognition as the July CASA Volunteer of the month.

## AUGUST 2010

### Bob Janesko

As the Volunteer of the Month for August, CASA of Allegheny County is happy to recognize Bob Janesko for his wonderful advocacy. Bob has offered to take his third case and consistently drives out of county to visit with the child to whom he is assigned at least twice per month. He also maintains regular contact with Foster Mother and the child's school professionals, as well as with the CYF Caseworker and mental health coordinator. Bob demonstrates genuine interest in finding permanence for this young boy and he has consistently expressed concern, and advocates, for what is truly in the boy's best interest. Bob's attendance at all court hearings and meetings has been exemplary and his frequent updates to his CASA Case Manager has helped to ensure that everyone is effectively advocating for the needs of this child. Congratulations, Bob, on a well-deserved honor!

## SEPTEMBER 2010

### Rhonda Wilburn



CASA of Allegheny County is pleased to honor Rhonda Wilburn as the Volunteer of the Month for September. Rhonda advocated for a 5-year-old little girl who was not having her needs met. In less than a week of advocating for her, Rhonda completed a home visit, school visit and had an in-depth discussion with the mental health records department. This

investigation revealed that the girl was not being physically cared for – there were bald spots in her scalp, she had severe tooth decay as reported to the foster family by the school nurse that was never addressed, she did not have any toys and had very few clothes. Rhonda also found that the girl had not been to mental health therapy since her referral in January 2010. Once Rhonda informed the courts of these concerns, the young girl began receiving her mental health treatment. In addition to being a champion for this young girl, Rhonda is also an inspiration to her Case Manager – providing the case with much-needed energy. Thank you Rhonda for your outstanding work!

## OCTOBER 2010

### Gloria Hahn



Congratulations to Gloria Hahn, CASA Volunteer of the Month for October! Gloria serves three young children and she consistently goes above and beyond what is required to visit them both at home and at school. She is very thorough when conducting walkthroughs of the home, assuring the children's safety at all times. Gloria also maintains contact with all of the adults in the case, including the Maternal Grandmother and her paramour, the CYF Caseworker and the Educational Guardian. She attends all court hearings and advocates strongly for the children, all while demonstrating genuine care and compassion for their futures. Gloria is truly an example of professionalism and we are pleased to honor her commitment.

## NOVEMBER 2010

### Debbie Scharf



Congratulations to Debbie Scharf, CASA Volunteer of the Month for November. Debbie has done a wonderful job of keeping in touch with all of the foster parents and arranging visits for the children on her case. Some of the foster parents know her quite well and contact her directly with any concerns they may have. The children are becoming more familiar with Debbie as well. She has stayed in good communication with her Case Manager and is demonstrably eager to see the best outcome for the children. Debbie is working to make plans for staying ahead of the curve on the case and has been following through very well. CASA is very happy to honor Debbie with a Volunteer of the Month award!

## DECEMBER 2010

### Carol Kowall



CASA is pleased to recognize Carol Kowall as the CASA Volunteer of the Month for December. Carol serves as the CASA on a very difficult case with seven children. As she understands the dynamics of the family and their needs, she collaborates with all service professionals and attorneys regarding the children. Carol also maintains contact with the children through regular visits at their foster homes and through supervised visits with Mother. She is invested in advocating strongly for every child and every need of the child and is committed to attending all court hearings and meetings. Through her advocacy, Carol is assuring that reasonable efforts are put forth in meeting Mother's needs and she has used her background in the legal field to bring clarity to the complexities of the case. For her analytical and detailed dedication to this very difficult case, we congratulate Carol on her Volunteer of the Month honor.

## The Unified Family Court and its effect on CASA's work for children

By: Daren A. Ellerbee, M.S.

It has been one year since the Fifth Judicial District's Family Division in Allegheny County launched a Unified Family Court led by the Honorable David N. Wecht.

Judge Wecht, who has been a judge in the Family Division since his appointment in 2003, thinks that the implementation of the Unified Family Court system was necessary and important for families. "I felt that it was important that the same judge address all of the families' needs," said Wecht. "With the cooperation of the other judges and our staff, we implemented a unified family court process," Judge Wecht said.

The idea behind the Unified Family Court is innovative, allowing one judge to oversee cases involving the same families. According to Judge Wecht, before the implementation of the unified family court, "if the same judge saw those litigants or those families or children in their successive returns to our division, it was accidental or idiosyncratic, and now by design and systematic work, the same judge will deal with that family no matter what brings them in."

Wecht further explained, "No matter what 'door' of our division a family enters through, the same judge will follow that family." For example, "We have many cases where a case might begin as a custody case and then it becomes a dependency case," said Wecht.

The "One Judge, One Family" concept is now being implemented to ensure consistency, and according to Judge Wecht, other benefits include, "economy, efficiency, predictability, rationality and time."

This new system is designed to alleviate a lot of the stresses that families endured in the past. "It is very distressful to families and others when the litigants have to educate an entirely new judge and 'reinvent the wheel', and do things all over again," Judge Wecht said.

Overall, this change will benefit children and hopefully shorten their involvement with Family Court. "We recognize inherently that coming downtown to family court is stressful for people, and is not the atmosphere where children should be raised and families spend their lives" said Wecht. Our objective is to make a reasoned decision under the law, to do it promptly without delay, without undue inconvenience and to do right by people, so that [families] can get on with their lives," Judge Wecht said.

This change was welcomed by CASA of Allegheny County, whose mission is to ensure that every child has a safe, supportive and permanent home. Danielle Morrison, M.C.P., believes that the achievement of the Unified Family Court system was an appreciated modification to the court process. "Our CASA program has always been in favor of having the same Judge serve our children and families" said Morrison.

In her role as Program Director of CASA, Ms. Morrison believes, "As CASAs, it makes our job easier when one Judge serves our children." Ms. Morrison continued, "If the unfortunate arises and a family returns to the system, the same judge will preside over the proceedings thereby making the most informed decisions."

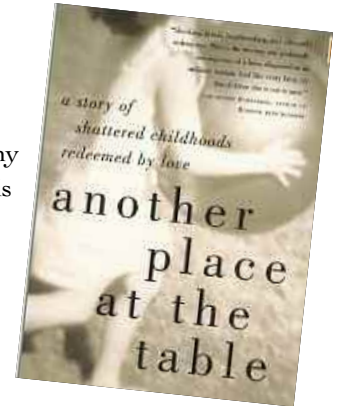
Ms. Morrison also believes that the change to a "One Family, One Judge" system was a necessary change. "The One Judge, One Family standard is needed within our courts because it promotes the consistency that children need," Ms. Morrison said.

Ms. Morrison warns not to lose sight of who is affected by instability. "We tend to talk about children needing consistency so much that it can sound cliché, but we have to look deeply at our own work to assure we are practicing consistency," said Morrison. A Unified Family Court is definitely a step in the right direction.

## Recommended Reading

By: Teddi Prettiman

Another Place at the Table by Kathy Harrison (Tarcher/Penguin 2003) is the highly engrossing memoir of a Massachusetts foster mother many times over, a narrative that deftly weaves together individual stories about a few of the children she has cared for while being careful to respect the children and their families' privacy.



Kathy Harrison has fostered over 100 children in her state's child welfare system, and is an adoptive parent of three. Throughout this exceptionally well-written account regarding her many years of service, Harrison examines the system from all angles and shows sensitivity to every side. While she is frustrated by some bureaucratic flaws, she also repeatedly acknowledges the accomplishments and advances that have been made over the past 15 years or so – advances that have directly impacted the children both temporarily and permanently in her care.

After "regular" fostering for a few years, she eventually volunteered to be a hot-line foster parent, receiving constant late night emergency calls to provide shelter for children in immediate crisis. Some children would only be with her for a day or two until longer-term arrangements could be made, while others stayed for months or years. With more experience and ongoing training, she began to specialize in very difficult cases and medically fragile children. She eventually became an official statewide trainer and mentor for other foster parents, in addition to continuing her full-time parenting and foster-parenting duties.

Kathy Harrison has received several prestigious awards for her service to the children of Massachusetts, and while her tireless work is impressive and inspiring, she writes with great humility. One of the most likeable attributes to her story, in addition to its intelligence and compelling readability, is that she never comes across as saintly or out of reach. She readily acknowledges the daily mistakes she has made as a foster parent, the emotional frailty she has displayed from time to time, and just how much she hasn't understood about the children she cared for. Her greatest strengths, however, are her willingness to always learn more and never be afraid to seek out help, as well as her compassion and empathy for all parties involved. Kathy Harrison's natural writing ability, specificity, and powerful descriptions of the children and their personal histories in *Another Place at the Table* are what make this a fascinating read – but her candid emotional honesty is what makes this story so remarkable and human.

# Spread *the* Word!

( about CASA training )

If you, or someone you know, is interested in learning more about the many ways to become involved with CASA, please attend one of our monthly Open House sessions. They are held at 6PM on the third Wednesday of every month in the CASA office. For more information, or to RSVP, please contact **Daren Ellerbee at 412-594-3606** or **dellerbee@pgh-casa.org**.

## Save the Date

CASA of Allegheny County will host the Annual Volunteer Recognition Dinner at LeMont Restaurant on **Thursday, April 14**. This is the signature event of the year, giving CASA the opportunity to honor every volunteer and supporter who has worked to break the cycle of child abuse in our community. Invitations will reach your email inboxes soon and we hope you will be able to join us as we stand together and thank these very deserving individuals. For more information, or to RSVP, please contact Monica Gay at 412-594-3606 or **mgay@pgh-casa.org**. Or, visit our website at **www.pgh-casa.org**.



### Are you mad for Mad Mex?

If so, you'll want to be sure to make plans to join CASA on **Tuesday, August 16** at the Mad Mex in Robinson for a special dinner benefitting CASA of Allegheny County. A limited number of tickets, just \$40 each, will be available for this exclusive dining event. More details, and online ticket purchases, will be available soon.

## CASA COUNTS

### *waiting list*

229

children have been served by CASA this year

37

children wait for a volunteer

47

children's cases have closed this year

## CASA Mission

To ensure that every child has a safe, supportive and permanent home by providing volunteer advocacy for the best interests of abused and neglected children within the child welfare system.

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- Joseph Martin, *Case Manager*
- Danielle Morrison, MSCP, *Program Director*
- Teddi Prettiman, *Development Coordinator*
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