



the Advocate Newsletter

Winter 2023



CASA of Yellowstone County's Mission is to advocate for a safe and permanent home for abused and neglected children in Yellowstone County. We wouldn't be here without the generosity and care of our community.

Thank You!



A Letter from Executive Director **Drew MacLeod**

As we move further into 2023 and 2022 slips into history, I want to send a Thank You to everyone in the CASA of Yellowstone County family for a year of successes and robust advocacy for children in foster care. I am grateful for this community of caring people who give in so many ways to ensure kids in the Yellowstone County child welfare system have the best outcomes possible. I would like to give a big shout-out to the staff that put incredible amounts of heart and intention into making the volunteer experience a positive and effective one. The work of CASA of Yellowstone County is so much more impactful when there is an outstanding team behind you who is mission-driven, advocate-centered, and child-focused.

The CASA program in Yellowstone County began in 2000 under the umbrella of Family Support Network (FSN) under the leadership of Barbara Sample. The first class of seven volunteer Advocates “swore-in” October 2000, with most of the 13th Judicial District judges in attendance. Early in 2002, CASA and FSN agreed to transition CASA from FSN’s sponsorship to incorporation and non-profit tax status of its own. Yellowstone CASA’s original by-laws were adopted in February of 2003 by the Board Of Directors including Edie Adams, Susan Anderson, Virginia Court, Kip Farnum, Damon Gannett, Patrick Kenney, Phyllis Roberts, and Anne Marie Wade. The CASA program was under the leadership of Director Shirley Folkwein. There was roughly \$50,000 in the bank that year. In March 2003, CASA was recognized as a non-profit by the IRS. I suppose we could have celebrated CASA’s 20th a couple of years ago, but if you remember, we were preoccupied with and in the middle of a pandemic. So how about this year we celebrate the 20-year anniversary of being an official CASA program and honor the long list of dedicated volunteers (over 1,000 of them), invested board members, and the energetic staff that has built the largest CASA program in the state of Montana!

Do you know a CASA volunteer? Tell them how much you appreciate their work on behalf of children and families in Yellowstone County. Chances are, being a CASA volunteer is just one of the amazing things they have done for others. It is no small commitment to agree to be the voice for a child in the foster care system, and for their service, we are grateful.

With Gratitude,

Drew MacLeod

CASA of Yellowstone County Executive Director

Congratulations Fall Class!



Congratulations to CASA's fall class of new Court Appointed Special Advocates! The organization recognizes these wonderful community members for their hard work throughout pre-service training. A special thank you to Judge Harada for swearing in this class and for her support of CASA of Yellowstone County.



Join us for coffee and learn more about
CASA of Yellowstone County.

We meet regularly to give you the opportunity to ask questions and meet some of our volunteer Court Appointed Special Advocates who work with kids in foster care.

The next Coffee with CASA will be
on **May 4th** at Maple Moose
(1605 Annafeld Parkway East Billings, MT) at **5:30 PM**

Promise, Grayson, & Selah's

Story

In 2017, Promise, Grayson and Selah left the foster care system and went home to their parents' care. Their volunteer Court Appointed Special Advocate was with them for two years before the case was closed in reunification with their parents.

In 2020, the kids entered foster care again after multiple reports of the kids coming to school dirty, hungry, and bruised. Child and Family Services investigated and found their dad was deep into an alcohol addiction and was physically abusive to the three kids when he drank. At this point, 12-year-old Promise was taking care of her two younger siblings as best she could. The children's mom was in a drug treatment center out-of-state. Due to serious safety issues, the kids went to live with a family friend while dad agreed to start treatment for his substance use and anger management classes.

Several months into their second time in foster care, a social worker reached out to the CASA office requesting a volunteer Court Appointed Special Advocate for their case. The kids' original volunteer Advocate had been retired for several years by the time the children re-entered foster care. Fortunately, a new volunteer Advocate stepped up to and was appointed to the case.

Soon after the kids met their new volunteer Advocate, they had to move homes again because their family friends could not take care of all the kids. It was challenging for the kids to move again, and the older two kids, Promise and Grayson, had to move schools as well, adding another layer of stress and uncertainty to an already difficult time. Initially, Grayson and Promise were not particularly welcoming to their new volunteer Advocate and made it clear they expected her to drop out of their lives, like other adults around them. The kids struggled in their relationship with their father, who was working to be a safe parent for the kids but was still struggling with his addictions.

Through consistent visits at their foster home and school, their volunteer Court Appointed Special Advocate slowly built a trust and rapport with all three kids. Eventually, the kids came to know her as a safe, trusted friend. Promise and Grayson started to get involved in their school community through sports and music. They frequently invited their CASA to attend games and concerts. Their foster parents also became a source of support

and stability for the three siblings. Most of all, this gave Promise the opportunity to be a teenager instead of being a mom for her younger siblings. Fortunately, Selah did not have to change schools when they moved into their new foster home. She was always excited to see her CASA at school and was excited to introduce her to all her friends.

Tragically, several months into the case, the kids' mom passed away suddenly due to a drug overdose. This was an incredibly difficult time for the kids as they mourned the loss of their mother. They relied heavily on their CASA and foster parents through this time.

A year went by, and the kids had settled into a good rhythm with their foster parents and their school. They saw their dad off and on throughout the year, having supervised visits with him first, and then later staying with him at home. The plan was to transition the kids home later in the year if all went well. The plan for reunification was put on hold when dad was diagnosed with an aggressive form of cancer. Throughout this time, the CASA worked tirelessly and advocated for the kids. She helped to get them into therapy services, and they each started individual counseling sessions. Several times a month, all three kids would attend a family session together.

Unfortunately, between his struggle with cancer and his work schedule, the kids' dad was not able to care for the three siblings properly and it was finally decided, after three years of being in foster care, that the foster parents would become their legal guardians and permanent home. Their CASA, though no longer on their case officially, still visits the family often and is a source of connection and support for the three kids.

This is a true story about a family in the Billings community and their volunteer Court Appointed Special Advocate. When you support CASA of Yellowstone County, you support children like Promise, Grayson, and Selah.





STRENGTHENING FAMILIES

Protective Factors Framework Training

Strengthening Families is a protective factors approach for the prevention of child maltreatment, focused on engaging families by emphasizing their strengths. This includes what parents and caregivers are doing well, as well as identifying areas where families have room to grow with support. Protective factors ensure children and youth thrive at home, in school, at work, and in the community. They also serve as safeguards, helping parents find resources, support, or coping strategies which allow them to parent effectively—even under stress.



Join us **March 28th & 29th from 9 AM to 5 PM each day** at United Way of Yellowstone County (2173 Overland Ave, Billings, MT). Lunch and training materials will be provided each day!
You must register to attend this training: www.yellowstonecasa.org/event/strengthening-families

CASA of Yellowstone County's Underground Dinner

What an amazing night at Abby's Catering Company for the CASA Underground Dinner. It was a wonderful time with great people, delicious food, and all while supporting the work CASA does for the children in our local foster care. Thank you to those who joined us! A special thanks to Tom, Abby, and their crew for putting on the 7th Annual Underground Dinner to support CASA of Yellowstone County.



Memorial Gifts

In memory of Jan Butorovich
Nancy Steel

In memory of Loretta & Roger Garrett
Sue Bogunovich

In memory of Mark Priest
Arlene Priest

In memory of Dr. Chris Carstens
Joanne & Bud Leuthold

In memory of Katy Dukart Hirsch
Brenda & Eugene Olheiser

In memory of Tara Sinkler
Joan & Tim Sleeth
Emily Gaudreau

In memory of Don Dundas
Robert & Dorothy McLain

In memory of Ted Lechner
Nancy & John Cook
Patty Lechner
John & Debra Miller

In memory of Charlotte Sperber
Nancy Stanley

In memory of Damon Gannett
Dixie Bertagna

Honor Gifts

In honor of Donna & Rick Beitel
Judy Lampi

In honor of Julie Kleman
Gail Kleman

In honor of Harvey Watts
Joan Watts Brown

In honor of Frank & Mary Hemphill
Emily Hemphill

In honor of their grandchildren
Kathy & David Munson

In honor of Erin Zimmer
Anne & Jim Nichols

In honor of Vera Ulschak
Lillian & James Hartung

Memorial & Honor Gift Form



Amount _____ Send Acknowledgement to:
Given by _____ Name _____
Address _____ Address _____
City _____ City _____
State _____ Zip _____ State _____ Zip _____
In Memory/In Honor of _____

Mail to: CASA of Yellowstone County | P.O. Box 688 Billings, MT 59103



Advocate Spotlight

Melissa Rich



Melissa became a Court Appointed Special Advocate four years ago after learning about the need for additional advocates to serve children in foster care. This need spoke to her heart and called her into action. Recently, Melissa completed additional training to become a Peer Coordinator and mentor to other Advocates. Melissa and her husband live in Billings, and they have a busy household with four kids and one nephew. Melissa is very adventurous; she loves exploring new places, hiking (especially when it involves high mountain peaks), traveling, and geocaching with her kids.

Melissa admits early on, she did not realize how big of a role a CASA could fill. Her own childhood experiences helped shape her into someone who cares deeply for others. She describes how “children in the foster system are some of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged populations; displaced from their homes due to abuse, neglect, and sometimes both, these kids are in desperate need of someone to show up for them and be the one constant person in their lives.” Melissa knew she was capable of being a child’s continual support, exemplifying love, and compassion—but more importantly, she knew she could be a voice for the voiceless.

On this journey, Melissa has learned CASAs are not only a vital part of the child’s life while in the foster system, but they can also be great support systems for the children’s parents, who are often faced with overwhelming obstacles to regain custody. The attention needed for each case and the people involved—combined with the daunting caseloads of social workers and guardians ad litem—increases the likelihood of things going unseen or unreported. With the significant role CASAs play in reporting, as well as being in continuous communication with social workers and associated parties, CASAs can help tremendously to ensure services are completed, which ultimately speeds up the resolution of cases and decreases the time children spend in care. For these reasons, Melissa believes every child needs a CASA.

Per capita, Montana has one of the highest populations of youth in foster care. In Yellowstone County alone, there are 700 children in foster care, and close to 500 of those are still in need of a CASA. Melissa’s advice to those thinking about becoming an Advocate is, DO IT! Will it be hard at times? Yes. Will it take up some of your time? Yes. However, from her own personal experiences, the fulfillment of making a difference in these kids’ lives has dramatically exceeded any challenges she has had while being an Advocate.

Thus far, Melissa has been an Advocate for mostly younger children but is currently an Advocate for a teen. Her teenager is determined to make a bright future for herself, and Melissa says she is truly honored to know such a hardworking, inspiring individual. Melissa has been privileged to be a reliable and available contact—and a voice to the judge, social workers, and attorneys when this young woman has felt unheard. The teen on her case has shown Melissa what it means to be brave, strong, and resilient. Being the CASA on this case started as a meaningful role, and this relationship has brought about a bond between them that Melissa will cherish and cultivate far beyond the case-close date. As Melissa describes it, being a CASA is one of the most rewarding opportunities she has been given.

In closing, Melissa said, “I would like to give a shout-out and huge thank you to the CASA staff who train us, support us, and are readily available to answer our questions—you all are the best!”

Thank you for your commitment and dedication, Melissa! The CASA organization is incredibly grateful for all you do!



You can be a superhero for a child in foster care

CASA
Court Appointed Special Advocates
FOR CHILDREN
CASA OF YELLOWSTONE COUNTY

20 YEARS

Become A CASA

Join an Upcoming Information Session to learn how you can change a child's life

March 15th at 6 PM
(Virtual)

April 6th at 10 AM
(CASA Office)

April 18th at 6 PM
(Virtual)



Court Appointed Special Advocates
FOR CHILDREN

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FOR CHILDREN

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20 YEARS