

# A VOICE FOR THE VOICELESS

## CASAS WORK TO PROTECT CHILDREN

**W**hen a child abuse or neglect case comes before a Rock County judge, there are many voices that must be heard — parents, social workers, school officials and health care providers. But the most important voice of all may become drowned out — that of the child. That’s where Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASAs) come in, and why they are so vital in protecting particularly vulnerable children.

Jane Brewer became a CASA volunteer a little more than a year ago, and the experience has changed her life. She first learned about the program when she was teaching at Fort Atkinson High School and heard another teacher, Dean Johnson, talk about attending fundraisers (Dean’s wife, Sandy, is the CASA of Rock County director). She was interested, but didn’t think any more about it until she left full-time teaching to spend more time with her youngest child. “I was looking for an opportunity to volunteer and still be active in children’s lives,” she says. “Being a CASA seemed like a perfect opportunity to make an impact.”



Jane Brewer has found her calling as a Court Appointed Special Advocate in Rock County.

## RIGOROUS TRAINING

In 1977, Seattle Superior Court Judge David Soukup created the CASA program after he realized he was making decisions for children when he didn't feel he had enough information. He thought well-trained volunteers could ensure children's voices were heard and provide judges with additional information they needed to make an informed decision. Today, CASA of Rock County is one of 950 programs nationwide and has been providing volunteer advocacy services since 2005.

CASA volunteers receive more than 30 hours of training before they even start working with children, and 12 hours of continuing education every year. The training is meant to prepare them for the kinds of situations they might encounter, but, as Jane notes, not even 100 hours of training would be enough. Much of the job requires CASAs to think on their feet and always stay focused on what is best for the child, which the training emphasizes.

Once a CASA finishes his or her training, program staff members work to match

the volunteer with a child or group of siblings (when there is more than one child in a family, they all receive the same CASA). The volunteer is sworn in by the judge as a "friend of the court" and frequently visits the child in various locations such as at school, in the foster home (if the child is in foster care), or in the child's home. The CASA also takes the child on outings in the community to develop a trusting relationship.

Eighty percent of the cases in which CASAs are appointed are situations where a child has been neglected. "Due



Makinzie Rogahn, left, Outreach Coordinator at CASA of Rock County, and Alyssa Whitney, Child Advocacy Support Specialist, go over some paperwork.



In her role as a CASA, Jane spends significant time with the children she is charged to represent.

to the opioid crisis in Rock County, there are many children who are not receiving the care they need," says Kortney Karnok, Advocacy and Personnel Manager for CASA of Rock County. "Parents battling substance abuse often need help caring for their children."

## BECOMING A TRUSTED ADULT

Because of her background as a high

school educator, Jane had been hoping she would be matched with a teenage girl. But, as she quickly learned, sometimes God has other plans for where a child advocate is needed the most. She was matched right away with a group of siblings who were in foster care at the time. "I prayed about it, and I realized I was supposed to be in this place with these people," she says.

She spent time with the children — sometimes alone and sometimes with one or two of their siblings — at Janesville Jets games, Rotary Botanical Gardens, Chuck E. Cheese and at the mall to see the puppies. While they spent time together, they talked, and she was able to get a clearer idea of their situation. She also spent time talking with other people in their lives. "As a



The CASA of Rock County staff, from left: Kortney Karnok, Advocacy Personnel Manager; Sandy Johnson, Program Director; Makinzie Rogahn, Outreach Coordinator; Alyssa Whitney, Child Advocacy Support Specialist, Nicole Hamm, Child Advocacy Supervisor; and Kim Churchill, Child Advocacy Support Specialist and Supervisor.

CASA, you have to do some digging,” she says “You have to talk to as many people who are involved in these children’s lives as possible — neighbors, friends, therapists and teachers. You’re using all these pieces to create a child’s story.”

Ultimately, the children were placed back in their home relatively quickly, and Jane’s time as their CASA ended in April 2019. That’s not to say the situation was completely resolved. “In the Child Protective Services records, there was information that was alarming to me,” she says. “I have done my best to address that in the way that I have the power to do so. I’m not completely satisfied with how it turned out. Sometimes there are things going on in homes that legally meet standards, but as a person who loves children, they hurt my heart.”

Still, Jane believes the relationship she established with the children will have made a positive impact on their lives. She has given the family her phone number and plans to occasionally check in with them — not as a representative of the court, but as a friend and someone who cares deeply about the children’s welfare.

### VOLUNTEERS NEEDED

Jane has taken the summer off from her CASA duties to spend time with her own children, but she plans to take on another case as a CASA this fall. There’s certainly a need for it — there are 180 cases on the waiting list for a CASA, and only 61 CASAs in the Rock County court system. “We are appointed to every Child Protective Services case,” says Makinzie Rogahn, the program’s Outreach

Coordinator. “That’s why we have such a huge need for volunteers. The average amount of time that a CASA is on an individual case is two years, so we keep all of our volunteers very busy.”

CASA of Rock County is offering volunteer training this fall. If you would like to learn more about becoming a Court Appointed Special Advocate, call the office at (608) 305-0187 or apply on the website, [casarockcounty.org](http://casarockcounty.org).

“One person really can make a difference,” says Jane. “That’s why I believe this program is so important.”