

CASA of Walker County



NEWS RELEASE

For Immediate Release

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Every April, CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocates) of Walker, San Jacinto, and Trinity Counties celebrates the wonderful volunteers who advocate for children in foster care in this tri-county area. A stakeholder speaks, CPS caseworkers are recognized, milestones are acknowledged and the Advocate- and New-Advocate-of-the-Year Awards are bestowed. As with so many other events, our Advocate Appreciation Luau fell victim to Covid-19.

Undaunted by the current pandemic, the CASA staff arranged a ***Cinco de Mayo Zoom Event***. Instead of a tropical beverage provided by the staff, advocates furnished their own Coronas, Margaritas or softer *Cinco de Mayo* beverages. The sausage shish kabobs gave way to chips and salsa from the advocates' pantries, and ponchos and sombreros replaced floral leis. Although the staff and advocates did not gather under one roof to share their laughter, congratulations, and happy tears; technology helped them link together to honor various achievements.

The evening began with a quick overview of various Zoom features (how to clap, chat, etc.), and then moved to a quick poll of those in attendance (advocates, board, etc.). After this introduction, the staff shared the miles traveled by the organization as a whole and the totals for the top ten travelers of 2019. Long-time advocate Chris Supan managed to garner the third most traveled miles, 5,090. Diana Pelham's tires rotated along 7,209 miles of road into the second-place position. Amanda Marshall stood atop the podiums first place spot with 9,489 miles. Altogether, the CASAs of Walker, San Jacinto, and Trinity Counties traveled a total of 85,832 miles in 2019.

The volunteers of this organization work side-by-side with the often-underappreciated caseworkers of CPS. Advocates did not let this night of celebration go by without offering praise to their tireless efforts. Trish Wilson reached out to her caseworker with the following note, "I want to thank you for all of your help and guidance you have given me during the past year. I have had the pleasure of working with you on two cases, and I look forward to continue working with you on future cases." Another volunteer said, "I just

wanted to take a moment to tell you how much I appreciate what you do for the kids. I also appreciate your communication and thoroughness of responses... T and L have also express to me on more than one occasion how thankful they are for you. You keep them abreast of important information as well as make them feel supported." Several more volunteers took the time to send a card or email to encourage their caseworkers.

The Advocates also took time to give each other shout-outs. "I would like to give the biggest shout-out to Sharon Dieringer!!! She has been such a great positive influence in my CASA journey from the beginning! Sharon has not only mentored me in creative ways to grow as an advocate, but she has also served as an important person in my future endeavors. With the help of Sharon, I was accepted into Loyola University of Chicago's Dual degree program of Social Work and Family Law. I truly cannot thank Sharon enough for the amazing work she has continued to do with CASA! She has inspired me to be the best social worker and CASA advocate that I can be! Sharon is a Rockstar," Mariah Hardy shared.

Catharine James lauded fellow volunteer, Tonie Sikes, "I would like to say a word of appreciation for my fellow advocate, Tonie Sikes. We worked together on the hospitality committee for the *Amplifying Advocacy Conference*. Tonie had wonderful and creative ideas to bless our speakers. She was always patient and calm, especially when I felt frustrated! I appreciate how organized and timely she was. Tonie has such a sweet spirit about her, and I can see how her lovely qualities make her an outstanding advocate."

The attendees to this unique gathering celebrated the four people that have served the local CASA program for more than five years. Although most cases are closed within 12-18 months, Jeanmarie Murray has faithfully stayed committed to be her CASA child's one constant for the past six years. Chris and Cindy Supan have faithfully served many CASA kids for seven years. Pat Stephenson has served this community for ten years.

The evening did not pass without praise bestowed upon the Board of Directors and their tireless efforts. Keith Ahee, Mary Charlotte Elliot, Maria Busby, and Terri Cook received recognition for the six years of service they have bestowed upon this organization. Sadly, these four have nearly completed their terms, but we have several Board Associates who are waiting to seamlessly step into these "big shoes".

The staff sprinkled various door prize drawings, most festive awards, and time for sharing throughout the evening, but imparting the information regarding the number of children being reunited with families or finding their "forever homes" was a priority for the evening. Since January 1, 2019, 135 children exited foster care: 19 Adoptions, 7 Aged-Out, 2 Emancipations, 41 Living with Relatives, and 66 Returned Home. These children spent 2,198 months in foster care or almost 66,000 days.

The evening culminated with sharing the nominations for the "New Advocate of the Year" and "Advocate of the Year". It was difficult to narrow the list to six nominees because the CASAs in this tri-county program are phenomenal. The staff reviewed the activities of 2019 and nominated Mariah Hardy, Catharine James, Lauren Rubenstein, Judy Vandiver, Trish Wilson, and Pam Zinnante. When Catharine James won the award, she graciously accepted the accolade with joyful tears.

The staff experienced the same struggle narrowing down the "Advocate of the Year" nominees. Finally, they made a list of the top six nominees: Sharon Dieringer, Matt Jugran, Amanda Marshall, Mary Partida, Renee Spencer and Lois Stehlik. Sharon Dieringer accepted the award with humility and poise.

All in attendance nominated who on the Zoom call created the best festive atmosphere. Some had backdrops; others dressed for the occasion. After the moderators for the evening announced the winner,

everyone was encouraged to stay on the call to talk and share. The beginning of CASA training always begins by building community. It is beautiful to see people of different races, genders, socioeconomic standings, religious beliefs, etc. congregate (virtually), encourage one another, appreciate each other, and stand together under the banner of being a “Voice for the Voiceless”. The abuse and neglect of children spikes during crises like these. CASA of Walker, San Jacinto, and Trinity Counties has an army of people standing ready to fight for our most vulnerable population. Are you ready to step in the trenches with these brave souls?

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