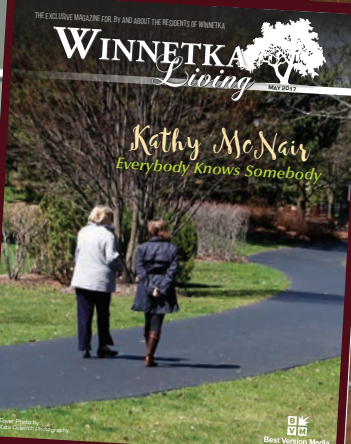


THE EXCLUSIVE MAGAZINE FOR, BY AND ABOUT THE RESIDENTS OF WINNETKA

# WINNETKA *Living*

NOVEMBER 2017

Anniversary Issue



**Inside:**  
Meet the Winnetka Residents  
Bringing Hope and Safe Homes  
to Children in Foster Care

Cover Photos by Kate Oelerich Photography

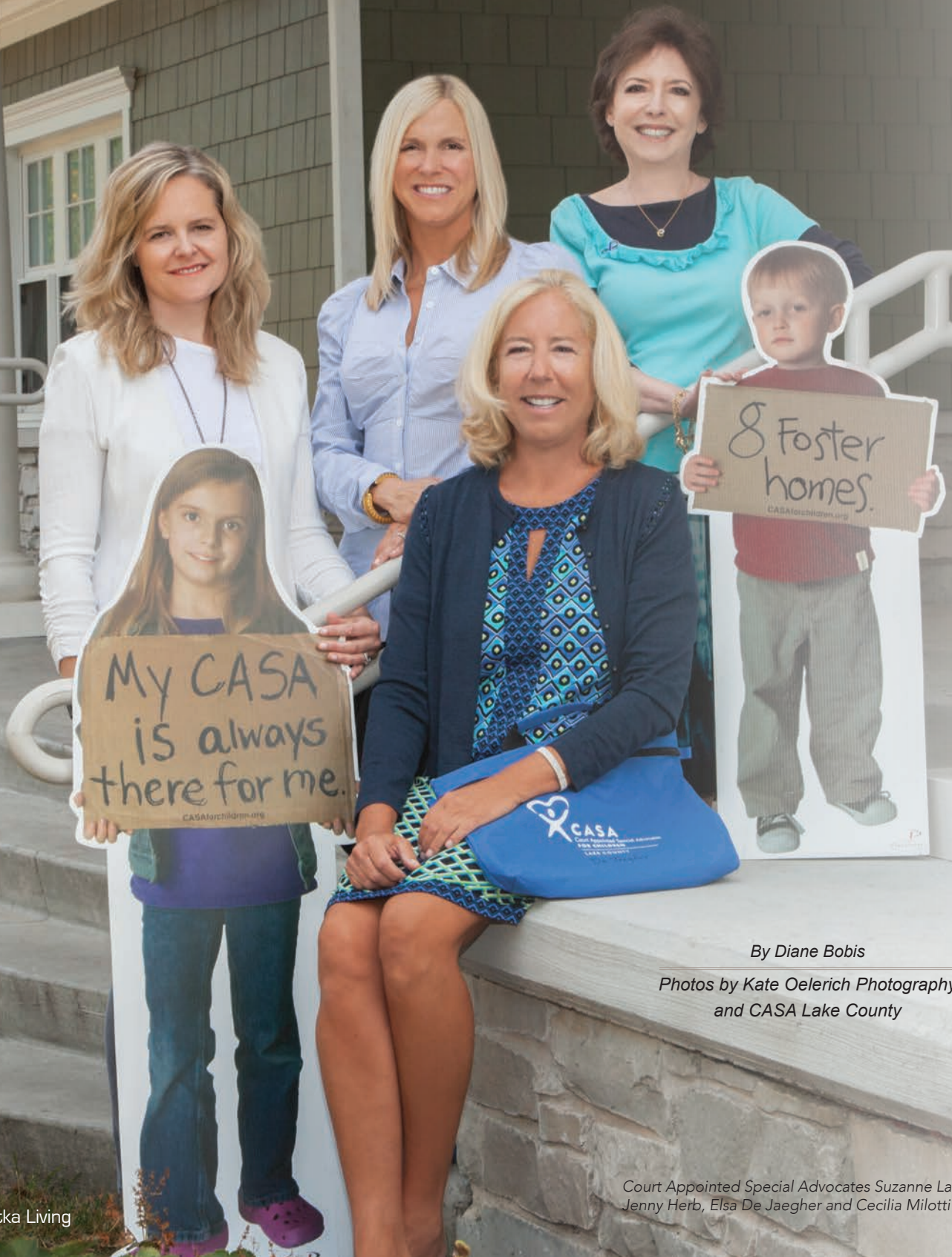


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# MEET THE WINNETKA CASAs

*Citizen Volunteers Bringing Hope and Safe Homes to Children in Foster Care*



By Diane Bobis

Photos by Kate Oelerich Photography  
and CASA Lake County

Court Appointed Special Advocates Suzanne Lavin,  
Jenny Herb, Elsa De Jaegher and Cecilia Milotti



“My first case involved a three-year-old little girl,” says Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) Cecilia Milotti of Winnetka. “I will never forget it, because incredibly, the biological mother made the hotline call to DCFS, letting them know she was incapable of caring for her child. Hotlines are rarely made by the biological parents, if ever. In a way, that was an act of love toward her child.”

According to the National Child Abuse Hotline, 3.6 million referrals are made to child protection agencies every year, with a report of child abuse being made every ten seconds. The result is more than 420,000 U.S. children currently living in the foster care system. But what happens to these children who are removed from their homes because it isn't safe for them to remain? Because their parents can't – or won't – take care of them?

In each case, an already scared and neglected or abused child is thrust into a world of chaos and uncertainty. Sometimes they are placed with a relative. More often, they are placed with complete strangers. Court proceedings, new schools, police officers, social workers, lawyers, and judges will forcibly become the new normal – as will a garbage bag to transport their belongings from one temporary placement to the next and the next.

“It is impossible to describe what the children in our cases endure,” says Cecilia, who committed to CASA Lake County as a volunteer in 2013. The average child spends nearly two years in foster care while a judge determines where they may safely and permanently live. As for the little girl Cecilia was first assigned to, it took three years for her to be adopted by the foster parents who took her in. During that lengthy period, Cecilia, as a trained CASA volunteer, was one of the few constants in the child's life.

Along with Elsa and Jean-Jacques De Jaegher, Suzanne Lavin, and Jenny Herb, Cecilia is one of the five Winnetka volunteers for CASA Lake County. The organization (which also includes residents Eric Zion as a board member and Noga Villalon on its executive committee) is a nonprofit that promotes and protects the best interests of abused and neglected children within the juvenile court system by thoroughly training volunteers to advocate for them in courts, in schools, and in the community. Volunteers are not required to have a specialized degree or be lawyers or social workers. They are teachers, grandparents, businesspeople, empty-nesters, stay-at-home moms, and ordinary (but extraordinary) people who want to make certain the voices of the most vulnerable among us are heard.

“CASA is the only volunteer organization that empowers everyday citizens as appointed friends of the court,” says Elsa, who first learned about the nonprofit through her work with the Mission Giving Team at Winnetka Congregational Church in 2012. “It's all about the foster child, advocating on the behalf of the child, achieving permanency for that child, and being a consistent adult in that child's life.” With husband Jean-Jacques also appointed as a volunteer, the couple has been assigned two heartbreaking cases involving larger families with multiple children in multiple placements.

“As an advocate, I have stepped into a world that I hardly knew existed before,” says Suzanne. “There are so many children in need, who are suffering from horrible and unnecessary abuse.” Last year, over 15,000 children were in foster care in Illinois. Of those, 573 were in foster care in neighboring Lake County, an area that reports some of the worst cases of neglect and abuse in the state.

The CASA program in Lake County was established in 1993 with the help of Judge Margaret Mullen. The nonprofit social



1 in 184 children in the U.S.  
are in the foster care system

service agency is a replication of the Seattle CASA program first implemented by Superior Court Judge David Soukup in 1977.

*“In criminal and civil cases, even though there were always many different points of view, you walked out of the courthouse at the end of the day and you said, ‘I’ve done my best; I can live with this decision,’” Judge Soukup explained. “But when you’re involved with a child and you’re trying to decide what to do to facilitate that child’s growth into a mature and happy adult, you don’t feel like you have sufficient information to allow you to make the right decision. You wonder, ‘Do I really know everything I should? Have I really been told all of the different things? Is this really right?’”*

To ensure he was getting all the facts and that the long-term welfare of each child was being represented, Judge Soukup obtained funding to recruit and train community volunteers to step into courtrooms on behalf of the children. National recognition for his work resulted in grants and the expansion of CASA with the passing of the “Victims of Child Abuse Act of 1990” – all of which have changed America's judicial procedure and the lives of over a million children.

“The training for CASA is intense and top notch,” says Suzanne. “You go through 40 hours of in-person training, including meeting with adults who used to be in foster care, visiting court, and doing role play to practice being effective in various scenarios. Best of all, you are assigned an Advocate Manager who supervises your case and is always there for experienced advice, guidance and feedback.”

There is no doubt becoming a CASA volunteer is a serious responsibility and emotional journey - but the rewards are immeasurable. After completing the pre-service training course, volunteers are sworn in by the court and must commit to work with their assigned child(ren) until they are placed in a safe and permanent home and the case is closed – or for at least two years.

During this time, volunteers spend approximately 10-15 hours per month on active casework, which includes three key roles: meeting with the foster child monthly and serving as a fact-finder and investigator for the judge, representing the child's best interests in court by preparing written reports, and acting as a “watchdog” to help bring the child into a safe, permanent and loving home as swiftly as possible. From checking on them at daycare or school to contacting doctors to attending as many of their events as possible, “We are involved in every aspect of these children's lives,” says Cecilia.

Volunteers also face the difficult task of working within the DCFS system, which has been repeatedly and recently under fire for its failures. “I have been on the same case since I became a CASA in February of 2015,” says Jenny, a former teacher who has always been interested in social work and counseling. “It has really opened my eyes to the challenges of the foster care system. But it has also shown me how wonderful foster



families can be. I have been with my foster child since she was three months old and I have seen her grow and blossom into a wonderful and loving child. It has been my privilege to advocate for her over the years."

"I always choose organizations where I can have hands-on, face-to-face engagement with a community in need," says Suzanne, who has previously worked with the homeless, the incarcerated and refugees. "I thrive when I can look someone in



482 abused and neglected children in Lake County have a CASA volunteer speaking up for their best interests.

the eyes and make a connection. As an advocate I get the opportunity to build a long-term relationship with one child (or siblings), better understand their environment and needs, and advocate for them to a judge. My opinion is valued and often acted on, which makes me feel as if I am truly

helping." Suzanne is currently the CASA for a two-year-old boy.

Today there are nearly 300 CASA volunteers serving as voices for the powerless and integral partners in the Lake County juvenile justice system. And with new children entering the system every week due to abuse or neglect, citizen advocates have proven to be a local solution. Children in foster care with a CASA volunteer do better over time in nearly every quantitative

measurement. Not only do they spend 7.5 fewer months in foster care, they are half as likely to re-enter it.


Despite these successes, CASA Lake County receives very little funding from the state. Throughout the year they depend on grants, donations and fundraisers such as their Golf for a Child Invitational or annual Gala. With 80% of CASA volunteers being women, the organization is also in desperate need of more male volunteers to provide support and mentorship to the boys in the foster care system. By the age of 18, many of these children have lived in multiple homes, attended an average of 9 different schools and worked with 7 different social workers. One in 5 of them will become homeless.


In a perfect world, there would be no need for foster care or CASA programs or children being taken from their homes, frightened, sometimes in the dead of night. But the reality is that nearly 700,000 children are abused in the U.S. annually – and four out of five abusers are the victim's own parents.

"I believe that my present case will be forever etched in my mind," says Cecilia, who last year accepted the emotional assignment of advocating for an abused child in grave condition. "The transformation of this little girl from the time she was dropped off at her foster home until now is astounding. She is surrounded by love and care and is flourishing and thriving."



For CASA Lake County, the goal is to have enough CASA volunteers for every child who needs one. A volunteer who can limit their suffering and help them look towards the future rather than a turbulent past.

To learn more about CASA Lake County, please visit [www.casalakecounty.com](http://www.casalakecounty.com).





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