

Improving a child's life...

CASA office opens in Watertown

By **Julianne Endres**
Watertown Area
Community Foundation

EDITOR'S NOTE: *As the Watertown Area Community Foundation continues its "40 Stories for 40 Years," it shares a story about CASA, an organization which is the recipient of two recent grants. One grant is being used for costs associated with recruiting prospective volunteers including advertising across social media, radio and newspaper. Another grant has allowed CASA to establish an office in Watertown. The CASA office is located across from the Codington County Courthouse in the old Post Office building on south Broadway.*

When you lift up a child's voice, you lift up a child's life. That statement is loud and clear on a brochure all about CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocates for children). The nationwide organization is in all states except North Dakota and has had a "voice" in Watertown since 2016 when the Brookings office expanded its coverage.

Then in fall of 2018, work began to establish a local office with

Cammie Mengwasser hired to put faces with that "voice." As program director/case manager, Mengwasser began recruiting volunteers in Codington



Mengwasser

County. Thus far the cases involving children outnumber the volunteers, Mengwasser said.

"At the end of April I had 29 cases with 18 being served by volunteers," she said. "As soon as we get done with some, more come in. We would definitely rather have a list of volunteers waiting to be matched than a child without a volunteer."

So, the call is out for more volunteers with a passion for helping children. Volunteers have complete background checks, undergo 30 hours of training and are sworn in as CASA advocates by a juvenile court judge.

Upon being matched with a child, the committed volunteer ensures that the child's individual needs and best interests are a priority throughout court proceedings. They get to know the



40 Years ... 40 Stories: The Watertown Area Community Foundation celebrates 40 years of "Looking Forward and Giving Back", in 2019. Join the Foundation as it takes the opportunity this year to not only celebrate, but also to look back with gratitude over the past 40 years.

child while gathering information to make recommendations to the presiding judge.

"It's difficult. No case is the same," Mengwasser said. "Everything is confidential. Volunteers can't even talk with their spouse about it."

But the rewards are beyond measure.

There was a little girl who was age 10, Mengwasser began. "She suffered years of emotional abuse from 'mom,' who had a lot of men in and out of the home."

As the girl got older she started to self-harm by cutting herself. She was placed with relatives and they

were fantastic, but there wasn't a lot of financial support. The CASA volunteer spent a lot of time with her and collaborated weekly with attorneys and the social worker, telling them that the girl needed something that would boost her self-confidence.

CASA asked a local dance facility for a scholarship.

"After a few classes, we saw her smile, relax and act like a kid again."

The case is now closed. The child remains with her relatives and the volunteer still has contact with her.

Once a case is closed, Mengwasser explained, it is up to the family and the advocate whether the volunteer stays in the child's life, but in many cases this is the case.

Another success story involved a small boy who endured years of abuse at the hands of his mother's boyfriends, Mengwasser said. He suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder before he even started pre-kindergarten.

The CASA volunteer spent the first several months visiting the child whether at his foster home, a visitation with his mother or at Head Start.

Engwasser said that even though it took a couple months before the child spoke to the volunteer, the advocate knew the importance of continuing to show up. Then there came a day when the little boy ran across the classroom to greet the volunteer and show him the art project he had made."



A boy walks with an older man toward the Codington County Courthouse, representing guidance that can be provided to a child by the Court-Appointed Special Advocate.

"Little ones who aren't able to tell you a whole lot are challenging," Mengwasser said.

Being that child's voice is even more important then. In this case, it was critical and truly changed the course of the little boy's life. The advocate's testimony was crucial. After all appeals were exhausted, the judge's initial ruling allowing the little boy to be adopted was upheld.

"He is now thriving in a loving home full of siblings and laughter. His PTSD symptoms have improved. He excels in school and he loves superheroes - especially Spiderman!"

Each child deserves that voice, she said.

"Our main goal is to serve every child who we are appointed with. I try to keep up with the ones who don't have a volunteer but they aren't getting that individual attention they would get from a volunteer," Mengwasser said. "We really want to educate the community on CASA, and as a whole, get the public familiar with our program and the success it can bring."

A 2007 national survey showed that children who have a CASA volunteer are half as likely to re-enter foster care, more likely to pass all their classes and will on average spend seven months less in foster care than a child without CASA.

For more information on CASA, call Mengwasser at 605-520-8002 or email: eccasacammie@swiftnet.net