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The Martin Family: AN OPEN DOOR

Cover photo by Nicole Scarborough



The Martin Family: AN OPEN DOOR

By David Marin

Nearly refugees – anonymous, dispossessed, homeless, and wandering – include a man from Afghanistan and two children among hundreds stuck in foster care. We know they're out there. The Martin family knows their names.

Kelly Martin and husband Woodson met on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C. and married in 1994. Kelly has a bachelor's degree in Political Science from Stanford University. She worked for several years for the U.S. House of Representatives, and then in government and public relations for nonprofit organizations. Woodson obtained a Bachelor's degree in English from James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Virginia and is an Executive Vice President and General Manager for Salesforce in San Francisco.

After living and working in Paris and London, Kelly and Woodson moved to Atherton because of the great public schools and to be near friends and family. Kelly's mother, Gwen, lives in Menlo Park. She is a retired Professor of Music at Linfield College in McMinnville, Oregon, where Kelly grew up, and now teaches private voice lessons. Kelly and Woodson also travel often to southern Alabama, where Woodson was raised, spending summers as a child on a river, learning to build and tinker in his grandfather's workshop.

Kelly and Woodson have two sons, 16-year-old Jake, and 18-year-old Keeton. Jake enjoys putting his building and engineering skills to work in his school's Robotics club, as well as developing international policy and debate skills through a local Model United Nations chapter. Jake also enjoys volunteering for local habitat restoration and environmental

preservation nonprofits in San Mateo County. Keeton is a leader in student government at his high school, and is a volunteer tutor and intern for Healthy Cities, a nonprofit organization providing one-on-one support for at-risk students in the Redwood City and San Carlos school districts.

While raising children, Kelly volunteered at local schools, including the Ravenswood School District. When her boys were toddlers, Kelly saw a newspaper advertisement seeking volunteers to help San Mateo County kids stuck in foster care. “I wanted to work with at-risk youth in the area,” Kelly says, “but had little time in my schedule, so I made a mental note... When our children began middle school, I began training as a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA). I was drawn to the idea of working with kids who have few or no adults to care for and help them.”

CASA, inspired by a judge frustrated with kids perpetually stuck in foster care, was founded in 1977 and now has 77,000 volunteers in 950 county programs nationwide helping 280,000 kids, with a list of 433,000 kids waiting for a volunteer. Kids with a CASA are more likely to graduate from high school, are adopted sooner, and benefit even more from having an adult role model.

“CASA is a unique program because you make an immediate and direct difference in a child’s life,” Kelly says. “After completing a thorough and informative training program, you are sworn in as a volunteer officer of the court paired with a child (or a sibling set) currently under the county’s protective care. As the volunteer advocate for the child, you become a person they can regularly rely on to go to bat for them – like helping them get noticed at school, and working with physicians, their foster family, and therapists.”

“Each child in the protective system has an attorney and a professional social worker assigned to him/her, but those professionals carry large caseloads of other kids, and may only see the child infrequently. A CASA sees his or her child every week, establishing a bond of trust and reliance and making sure the child’s needs are being met. Kids in the program face tall challenges, due to emotional and logistical traumas they may have experienced. But as a CASA, you know that you are fighting for what is best for them, and addressing their needs by rallying social

service resources and being a liaison with schools to make sure they don’t slip through the cracks.”

“I have worked with two kids in San Mateo County – one in early elementary school, and one who turned eighteen while I worked with her. I have enjoyed talking with these kids’ teachers, social workers, and therapists, and providing my own insights into what the kids need for their learning, their development, and their emotional and physical health. I have equally enjoyed just relaxing or playing with my CASA child – exploring local parks, museums, and holiday events. I won’t lie – it can be emotionally draining and heavy work at times, worrying about these kids’ futures and seeing first hand the obstacles they must overcome. But I just count on the firm belief that the baby steps I help my CASA kid take will add up to real differences in his life.”

Atherton has several CASA volunteers, according to San Mateo County Executive Director Pat Miljanich, each tasked with helping a child or children. One of the biggest challenges is academic – in the Bay Area, less than half of kids in foster care graduate from high school, with kids in foster care attending an average of nine different schools. The San Mateo County CASA office, in conjunction with Stanford researchers, developed a now national effort, the Academic Success program, to provide volunteer advocates with extra training to help their kids in school.

CASA San Mateo County has 284 advocate volunteers serving 332 children/youth, but has a waiting list of more than 200 children hoping for a CASA volunteer. Other opportunities to help include joining the board or a committee, inviting a CASA representative to speak at your group or company, or a donation. \$2,500, for example, provides training and support of one volunteer; many volunteers help their CASA kids for years.

The next CASA training classes are January 9 through February 13, 2018; two nights per week for five weeks. For more information, visit www.casaofsanmateo.org. “I highly recommend this volunteer work to Atherton residents of all ages,” Kelly says. “When you go through the training program, you meet fellow volunteers from all age groups and walks of life. You can be a CASA whether you are retired, have grown – or even young kids – of your own, or are a young professional wanting to give back and feel the reward of helping someone outside of your own

Continued on page 10.

Foster youth from infants to teens, including sibling groups, need a CASA. Photo provided by National CASA Association.





Jake Martin, Qismat Amin, and Keeton Martin at home in Atherton. Photo provided by Kelly Martin.

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routine and circle of influence. When I was doing the evening training classes to become certified, I was so fortunate that my mother would come and make dinner for my kids at the end of their schooldays while I went to class for a few hours. I was also glad to have my kids witness their mother taking the time to pursue this goal, to help a child who doesn't have the same support network and safety net in his/her present family situation."

Kelly recently made a fortuitous connection with fellow CASA volunteers -- a former U.S. Army Ranger, now in officer reserves, and his wife, who are advocates to two young siblings. They introduced Kelly and her family to 27-year-old Qismat Amin, a former translator for the officer and the U.S. military during operations in Afghanistan. The officer, now a law student at Stanford, helped sponsor and advocate for Qismat's visa -- that's how Qismat came close to Atherton. Then he came in.

"We have been so fortunate to develop a friendship with Qismat," Kelly says. "The experience of helping to welcome Qismat to Northern California -- e.g., helping him navigate opening bank accounts, the DMV, a job search, health insurance, a housing search and the like -- has taught our family so much about the very different world Qismat comes from, but also the amazing resilience and strength of someone like him who can take the brave steps to leave family and create a new life in a very different world."



San Mateo County CASA staff train and support volunteer advocates. Photo by Drew Altizer Photography.

"Qismat has spent some time living with us, and his presence at our dinner table is always an education and an inspiration. Our family loves introducing him to new U.S. customs and traditions -- e.g., taking him to his first American football game, brainstorming a Halloween costume, and breaking the Ramadan fast with a backyard BBQ with family and friends. We are excited that Qismat is calling this area home for now -- with a job at Tesla at the Stanford Shopping Center -- and that we can be part of his family-away-from-home." ■

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