

FEATURED

# From troubled to thriving

## Court Appointed Special Advocate program aids kids in need

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Ja'Sean Edison watches his son Kimariaye Edison play at San Mateo's Central Park. As a foster child, Edison was assisted by the Court Appointed Special Advocate program to ensure he had a positive male role model.

Andrea Laue/Daily Journal

It's been a decade since Ja'Sean Edison was out running the streets of San Mateo dabbling with drugs, truancy and even robbery. He remembers those rebellious days when he wouldn't show up at home and didn't really care about his future.

Edison was thrust into the county foster program as a child, not ever knowing his father and not being cared for by his mother. He calls himself a “troubled youth” then, a time when he felt nobody had his best interest.

It wasn’t until he turned 16 and met John, his CASA, or Court Appointed Special Advocate, that his life, at the time in a downward spiral, began to change dramatically.

“When I first met John, it took a while to warm up to him. I had never had a positive male role model,” said Edison, now 26 and a father himself. “I was messing up my life and didn’t realize it because that is only what I knew. Through it all John never judged me but said, ‘you’re not a bad kid but you’re making bad decisions.’”

Edison was part of a program called CASA of San Mateo County, which pairs adult volunteers with children who are under the protection of the juvenile court because their parents cannot or will not care for them. The advocate, known simply as a CASA, visits weekly and acts as a stable and independent advocate for the child in every area of the child’s life, working to constantly identify a child’s social, emotional, physical, developmental and academic needs. CASAs focus on the whole child – their needs, comfort and happiness – with the ultimate goal of helping the child have as normal a life as possible even under traumatic circumstances.

While it would be three years before Edison “aged out” of the foster system, his relationship with the man he said helped him graduate from high school and fought tirelessly on his behalf in court continues to flourish.

Like Edison, many kids come into the foster program and are thrown into a lot of chaos, sometimes being placed into a stranger’s care or torn from siblings, according to Patricia Miljanich, executive director of CASA of San Mateo County.

“Children need stability in order to thrive,” Miljanich said.

### **Huge need**

Through CASA of San Mateo County, nearly 330 children were cared for by approximately 280 volunteers last year alone. While Miljanich is extremely proud of the progress her organization is making, she said there is still a huge need for CASAs, with approximately 625 children in the county who could largely benefit from the program.

“It is such an amazing program and so unique because it’s all through volunteers,” Miljanich said. “They can be doing anything with their time but they choose to spend their time making a child’s life more stable.”

San Carlos resident and CASA volunteer Karen Boquist-Gelineau has been working with the agency for more than four years. She received her first child four years ago and said that it was not only a positive experience for her child who has since aged out of the system, but also for her own personal growth.

“We don’t have children, so I didn’t think I would be equipped to be that person for my child — this experience made me realize I am,” Boquist-Gelineau said.

Having grown up in a loving, supportive and encouraging environment herself, this experience made Boquist-Gelineau realize that there are so many children who do not.

“There are so many youth that are in need of this support — this is what make a troubled teen grow into a responsible adult,” she said.

### **Volunteer requirements**

CASAs are sworn in as officers of the court and have to swear to confidentially. A volunteer would first go through an orientation and an interview before undergoing a stringent background check. Once approved, a volunteer then undergoes a thorough training program in which experts from therapists, pediatricians and attorneys come together to train volunteers on the system. Volunteers also learn from officials with the foster care program, poverty experts, legal standard service and mental and child protective service experts.

This formal training provides CASAs with the support they need to advocate and evaluate a child’s needs and issue reports twice a year on the child’s overall progress. CASAs are asked to devote at the minimum 10 hours a month, which includes their weekly visit with their child.

### **‘Aid to the children’**

Anne Steiner, former CASA board president and current board member, has been interested in child issues since the 1970s when she was a teacher and discovered that a few of her students were being abused at home.

“This has always been an issue dear to my heart,” said Steiner, a resident of Portola Valley. “When we moved to San Mateo County years ago, I was so happy to learn that it had such a great view on how to help these children — to bring more services and aid to the children,” she said.

A CASA in 1989 to a 3-year-old girl who was being abused at home, Steiner remembers receiving the call to alert her that after much documentation and work, the child was removed from her abusive home. She said it brings tears to her eyes still.

“We went through hell to get this child out of a horrible situation,” she said.

It made Steiner realize then that making a positive change in a child’s life makes all the difference in that child’s future.

One of 1,000 CASA programs run separately in the country, the San Mateo County organization has been running independently since 2006, Miljanich said. CASA of San Mateo County is working to expand its program with more volunteers but also with additional programs to serve needs like physical and dental exams, education and more.

Visit [casaofsanmateo.org](http://casaofsanmateo.org) for more information on how to become a CASA or to donate time or money to this organization.