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# The Joint Archives *Quarterly*

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## ***Hot Tamales! CASA Celebrates Twenty-Five Years of Sharing, Caring, and Making a Difference***

By Amanda Palomino

Let's suppose, one day at your usual weekly office meeting or conference, the guest speaker informs you that you will be performing brain surgery. Regardless of the fact that you have no medical training whatsoever nor any desire to be a brain surgeon, your speaker insists that you have no choice but to perform the operation by yourself. How does that make you feel? Are you up for the challenge? Not to worry, says your speaker, because you will be provided with all the tools you need—scalpels, blades, forceps, hemostats, retractors, scissors—even books to read that explain everything. How do you feel now? Any more confident or still doubtful? Oh, and by the way, your speaker adds, not only must you complete this operation, you will also be graded on your performance, and you must do well enough to receive an A.

At this point, like most people, you are probably shaking in your boots, right? With so much at stake and so much pressure to do well, these demands are nearly impossible unless you've had at least some proper medical instruction. And this is exactly what Fonda Green, your guest speaker, wants you to realize. This imaginary exercise is Green's favorite way of explaining the situation which many elementary school children find themselves in. Like performing brain surgery, young students often struggle in school because they are given the tools but need additional help to figure out how to process information and manage their homework, which can be an extremely

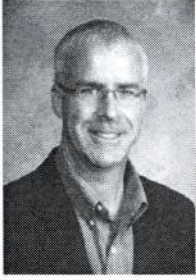
difficult task alone. Such at-risk students become frustrated and discouraged by their seeming inability to succeed, quickly falling by the wayside within the system and often dropping out of school at an early age, as overworked schools cannot always provide the specific attention and help these individual students need. But that, says Green, is where CASA comes in.



For twenty-five years, CASA has remained devoted to a belief in consistent, individualized attention to help at-risk students from first to fifth grade succeed in school. CASA, the Children's After-School Achievement program, offers one-on-one after-school tutoring to struggling elementary kids in Holland and West Ottawa schools, teaming each child up with a volunteer student from Hope College whom they meet with twice a week during the school year to study with and work on homework. In addition to the academic year program, CASA also runs a summer program in which kids are organized into small classes, going over a basic curriculum to encourage them to retain what they have learned. In both programs, transportation to and from Hope College is free, and CASA staff members work hard to actively monitor and assess student performance, building communication lines with schools and homes in order to promote a community of support around their kids. This year, in celebration of CASA's silver anniversary, the Joint Archives takes a look at the past, present, and future of this dedicated organization.

*(continued on page 2)*

## From the Director



With the holiday season comes many reasons to be thankful, including gratitude for the many people that have touched our lives. This past November, retired Joint Archives volunteer Russ Norden passed away after many years of service as a teacher and missionary to Japan for the Reformed Church in America.

His jokes and constant smile will be missed. The work he completed at the Joint Archives is invaluable to us, and it will continue to serve researchers into the future.

The article for this issue was penned by Hope College student and archives research assistant Amanda Palamino. Her enthusiasm for the processing of the CASA collection, conducting oral history interviews with past and current directors, researching and writing was infectious, and I am pleased to share the results with you.

Other student projects currently in progress are the writing of the history of the A. J. Muste Lecture Series and the man that inspired it (look for this story in the Winter 2013 issue), the digitizing of the Myron Van Ark postcard collection, and updating of our Hope College student listings from 1866 to present. Also, we have completed the digitizing of audio lectures of D. Ivan Dykstra from the mid-1970s. We look forward to completing more projects that will enable us to share with you the valuable resources we have been entrusted to preserve.

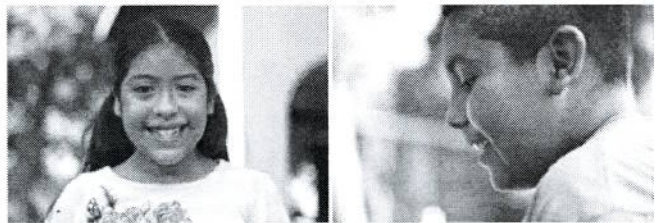
Geoffrey D. Reynolds

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### *CASA Celebrates 25 Years (continued from page 1)*

CASA's history began in 1987 with Marge Rivera, who was the Hispanic Outreach Director of First United Methodist Church in Holland. At the time, Rivera and other community members saw a need for a tutoring service similar to Upward Bound, another Hope-based after-school program for high school students. Liz Colburn, now the director of Upward Bound, remarks that although Upward Bound has achieved tremendous success with its high schoolers over the years, it is clear that students need this kind of help earlier on because "by the time they reach Upward Bound, many have already formed bad habits" with regard to school work and studying. The tutoring idea became an initiative called the Youth Awareness Project, later renamed CASA. The first program sessions consisted of 45 kids from grades one to eight and were held at First United Methodist Church. However, CASA quickly grew,

maxing out the space and human resources of the church and prompting Colburn to propose a move to a larger facility. Through Colburn, CASA came to the attention of Nancy Miller, then Dean of Social Sciences at Hope, who acquired permission from the college for CASA to set up residence in Graves Hall and tap into the student body for volunteers. Because of this partnership, CASA was able to realize its goal of completely one-on-one tutoring and start a complementary summer program in addition to its academic year program. Since 1989, CASA has operated out of Hope, with Hope students volunteering as tutors, serving more and more kids each year. In 2010-2011, CASA accepted 160 kids, grades one to five, and, according to Holland and West Ottawa school officials, there are as many as 450 more students in need of the program's additional academic support.



Today, CASA remains true to its purpose of helping at-risk elementary students to succeed in school and preparing them for further education. CASA's connection with area schools and communication with school personnel is an essential part of its service, beginning with teachers who identify struggling students and refer them to CASA. During the academic year, students ride the CASA bus to Hope after school, two days a week, either Monday and Wednesday or Tuesday and Thursday, and are brought home after 5:00 p.m. At CASA, they meet with their very own tutor—the same tutor they will work with every week—and spend time first on homework, then practicing their reading, and lastly in enrichment activities, such as flashcards, educational games, or in the computer lab. A few times a year, kids are treated to other enrichment activities they call "specials." These events are often sponsored by Hope College clubs or organizations, such as the Mortar Board's Pumpkin Carving event and the Phelps Scholars' Christmas Party. During the summer, the CASA program lasts six weeks, from the end of June through July. Small groups of about 15 to 17 kids, taught by certified teachers and qualified teachers' assistants, meet four days a week for four hours, with free transportation, breakfast, and lunch included. Every year, the CASA summer program adopts a different theme for their curriculum; in the past, themes have ranged from Water Conservation to Mystery-solving Science and have featured special cultural activities such as outings to the art museum, the theater, and nature center. These events add some extra fun to the CASA experience. However, Fonda Green, the executive director of CASA, stipulates

that CASA's primary focus is academics and, thanks to CASA's due diligence in maintaining that focus, CASA kids leave the program not just having had some fun but, moreover, having really learned a lot.

The commitment and enthusiasm of people like Green and the CASA staff and volunteers have certainly made CASA the successful program it is today. Make no mistake, the need for programs like CASA has not diminished since its first days. According to CASA's assessment, about 96% of their kids come from low or extremely low-income households and 78% come into the program reading below grade level. Many CASA students show improvement in reading levels each year and signs of increased academic and social development. Not only are the effects seen in CASA students now, but also as they continue their education. Upward Bound is seeing an uptick in CASA kids moving through their program, graduating high school, and moving on to college. Colburn suggests that by connecting with college students and a college campus through CASA, students in CASA can be more comfortable on a college campus like Hope's and see what education can do for them in the future. Eventually, the hope is that better educated individuals will lead to a more educated workforce, with people who are better prepared for jobs and more committed to community and volunteering.

CASA has been highly praised for its success from the beginning. In 1991, CASA was one of eight programs honored nationally in the Exemplary Program Study; more recently, CASA was recognized as an Outstanding Mentoring Program in the 2010 Governor's Service Award. But what makes CASA really special is perhaps



less tangible than test scores and honors like these: It is the immeasurable effect of the relationships fostered by CASA that help young students

see the value of education and feel like they really can succeed in school. As Colburn explains it, "the security of knowing someone will always be there to help you with school work, having that mentoring relationship... they may not remember the academic part, but they realize that experience helped them feel more confident overall..." Green describes the bond of tutors and students sitting "head to head and shoulder to shoulder" as "magical," and, as Colburn puts it, "...anytime you see a group of young kids engaged in learning and enjoying it, you can't help but smile, and that's what we see - a lot of happy, learning kids."

But perhaps no one can better describe what CASA means than the CASA kids themselves. Even those who have long since graduated remember their time in CASA fondly and gratefully. Leah Bracamonte, a former CASA student, insists that without CASA and Upward Bound, she would not be where she is today—in college, with a 3.0 GPA and plans to earn her degree in social work in Houston, Texas. Bracamonte recalls her CASA tutors as "big sisters." "With me being the oldest of the family, it was great to have someone to help me with homework and listen to my issues at home and at school without getting judgment," she says. "I hope wherever they are right now, they are doing great, because what they did for me and other kids, it helped mold our lives and they should know that."

So, with such an inspiring past and present, what's next for CASA? Green has lots of plans in the works, such as arranging for more intensive teacher and tutor orientation, as well as improving connections with CASA parents. Already, Green is excited to say, CASA has added some new elements to its program. For example, the Life Skills component, a new feature during enrichment time, will contain lessons for CASA kids on ways to achieve life-long, personal success and teach values such as good citizenship and community. Also, CASA and Upward Bound have begun a new program called Step Up, which will finally address the needs of middle school students, pairing them up with high school mentors in the Upward Bound program.

Of course, CASA still faces many obstacles as a non-profit organization. Though Hope generously supplies space, tutors and many in-kind services and support free-of-charge, CASA relies on outside donors and grants to pay staff and manage expenses. Yet, with such committed teachers, tutors, and staff, and kids who come eagerly every day after school working so hard, there must be something undeniably unique about the CASA program. As we celebrate CASA's twenty-fifth, we have to wonder just what is it that makes CASA so special, so different, so worthwhile? Colburn says it's the connection between the elementary schools and Hope College, the free transportation, and the one-on-one element that really make CASA stand out from other tutoring programs. Green agrees; she jokingly calls the tutor-student relationship the "Hot Tamale factor" because for elementary schoolers having their very own college student is just so cool! But more than that, Green says, is the success factor—the fact that every day, kids can come to CASA and feel success where before they felt frustration, feel valued where before they felt forgotten—that is what makes CASA really irreplaceable. An attitude of caring and a deep desire to make a difference is what has set CASA apart for twenty-five years and, God willing, will distinguish the program for years to come.



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*Summer 2012 CASA Staff and Students*