

CASA of Yuma County turns 30

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PHOTOS BY SISKO J. STARGAZER/YUMA SUN

Everyone involved with CASA of Yuma County sat together for a group picture in honor of the local program's 30th anniversary.

BY SISKO J. STARGAZER
SUN STAFF WRITER

CASA of Yuma County celebrated its 30th anniversary late April in a very special recognition and awards ceremony held at the Pivot Point Conference Center.

Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASAs) have been serving youth in Yuma's court system since 1992, acting as a constant in their lives and as their voice in the court speaking in their best interests. While the longest-serving CASA – Susan Steenhard – has been with the program for 24 years, even the newest CASAs were recognized for the special work they do.

"It's incredible being a part of an organization that has been around for 30 years and continues to grow and flourish," CASA Coordinator Veronica Davis. "And just supporting all of these amazing CASA volunteers – that really, they open their hearts to children and families that are in a really dire situation. The CASAs put aside their own values and beliefs and ideas about whatever the situation may be to make sure that that family is served properly and has every opportunity to reunify and become a family again."

Sandy Garrison, a fellow



Chris O'Brien was honored as CASA of the Year while KC Zargarian was honored with the Roadrunner Award for having spent 7,291 hours driving to fulfill her CASA duties in the past year. CASAs Jonathan Sanchez and Jessica Beltran (not pictured) were also honored with the Rookie of the Year and the Special Judges' Award.

coordinator, added that the volunteers are "phenomenal. These are people that have very busy lives and as Veronica said, 50% of them have work. That's huge: It's a big turnaround."

Long-time CASA and NOVA

Home Loans Branch Manager Jarrod Holiman described the experience as "transformative."

"We have 30+ years of stats that show that the outcomes for children in foster care are vastly improved when they have a Court Appointed Special

Advocate with them through that process," he said. "... I don't know what the outcome would have been had I not been an advocate for (my cases). But the outcome for the kids that I have advocated for has largely been – I would say 95% of those

children, the outcomes have been extraordinarily positive, ending in either reunification with their biological families ... or adoption.

"Being a CASA has been one of the most transformative things I've ever done. And seeing parents who have lost their children and talking with them and understanding the circumstances that have led them to the place that they never anticipated they would be in has given me a new appreciation for my fellow human."

NOVA Home Loans partnered with CASA to help make the anniversary celebration a special one because the program "improves the outcome for children in foster care in Yuma County." The Yuma Council for CASA Inc. was also a key sponsor.

Awards were also presented to standout CASAs: KC Zargarian was given the Roadrunner Award for 7,291 hours driving to fulfill her cases' needs; Jonathan Sanchez was awarded Rookie of the Year; and Christina O'Brien was awarded CASA of the Year. Jessica Beltran received a Special Judges' Award presented by Judge Erin Farrar.

To learn more about and connect with CASA of Yuma County, visit <https://www.azcourts.gov/casaofyumacounty>.



Juvenile Justice Center Director Ed Gilligan speaks on the importance of CASA.



Judge Erin Farrar (far right) presented a special award alongside CASA of Yuma County leaders (from left to right) Lisa Schaefer, Veronica Davis and Sandy Garrison.

