

# Advocate has spent 30 years improving lives

Michelle Bobrow to be honored for supporting foster children

By **JENNIFER ALTMANN**

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Michelle Bobrow, who will receive Essex County CASA's Star Honoree Award, says, "If we can make children's lives better, it's incumbent on us to do what we can."

Michelle Bobrow has spent 30 years serving as an advocate for children in foster care. As a volunteer with CASA — Court Appointed Special Advocate — she helps ensure that children who have been removed from their homes because of abuse, neglect, or abandonment have a safety net of support.

Appointed by a family court judge to conduct an independent investigation into a child's life, CASA advocates meet with parents, teachers, social workers, health-care workers, and relatives — and with the child — to gather information to help the judge assigned to the case evaluate the situation and make decisions about the youngster's future.

In the field, Bobrow is known for her tenacity. If her calls are not returned, she finds another way. "I set my teeth and move forward," said the Maplewood resident. "Kids are in situations through no fault of their own and they deserve better, and if we can make their lives better, it's incumbent on us to do what we can."

Bobrow will be honored Saturday, Oct. 19, at the Ruby Red Shoe Bash, which raises funds to recruit and train child advocates for CASA for Children of Essex County, the oldest and largest CASA program in New Jersey. She is the first recipient of the CASA Star Honoree Award, which recognizes outstanding volunteers.

Tamara Harris, the executive director of Essex County CASA, said Bobrow's work is critical to the well-being of the children. CASA interviewed several people, now adults, who had Bobrow as their advocate during childhood. Harris

said one woman told CASA having Bobrow on her side “was a turning point in her life; she is forever grateful.”

Bobrow said that when she joined a tutoring program as a volunteer while attending Douglass College at Rutgers University, “my eyes were opened. I saw that I was fortunate to have what I did, and I wanted to make things better for others.” She became a social worker at the Bureau of Children’s Services, a forerunner to the Division of Child Protection and Permanency. After taking a break when her daughter was young, she took the required 30-hour training program and began her volunteer work for CASA.

Bobrow’s service to the community extends beyond CASA. In 1991, she and her husband, Harold, founded the Bobrow Kosher Food Pantry, which operates out of their synagogue, Oheb Shalom Congregation in South Orange. The pantry serves about 200 households each month and is staffed entirely by volunteers; they gather at the synagogue to bag food on Wednesday nights and distribute it to families on Sunday mornings. She also works with the League of Women Voters and the New Jersey Coalition Against Human Trafficking.

CASA advocates typically handle just one case at a time, allowing them to fully focus on that child and any siblings and work in concert with the state’s social workers, who typically have a heavy caseload. “The system is overburdened,” Harris said. “We need more CASA advocates to support the court in meeting the needs of all the children in these straits.” If children have lived in multiple homes — either with family members or foster parents — “a CASA advocate may be the only consistent person in their life,” Harris said. “The stability can help minimize trauma and help a child navigate the complex child welfare system.” A CASA advocate usually works with each child for about three years. Essex CASA’s 253 volunteers provide services to more than 400 foster children a year.

Once in the foster care system, a child can sometimes spend years there, moving multiple times. More than a third of children transfer to a new school when they enter foster care, according to CASA. Research has shown that children with a CASA advocate are more likely to remain in school and either reunite with their family or find a permanent home, according to CASA reports.

CASA advocates meet with the child monthly and explain the proceedings. They submit a report to the judge with recommendations for the child and can be called on in court to answer questions from the judge.

Bobrow’s work as an advocate requires a mix of sleuthing and persistence, along with an ability to make difficult assessments about what is best for a child who has faced challenging circumstances. It is especially critical, she said, to figure out what areas the child’s needs are in — medical attention and educational support, for example — and try to ensure those needs are met. A CASA advocate must also help determine whether reuniting with family members is feasible and in the best interests of the child.

In one case, Bobrow was assigned a boy who was skipping school and getting low grades. The school administration was against having him tested, but, Bobrow said, “I fought long and hard to make sure he was evaluated by the child study team.” The findings: He had missed learning the fundamentals, so he couldn’t understand the material. After taking remedial courses, “he learned that he could learn, and he stayed in school and started doing better. He wasn’t the class clown anymore,” Bobrow said.

Spending 30 years serving as a CASA advocate — the average is about four years — makes Bobrow unique, said Harris: “It is such a powerful statement for someone to be dedicated to this work for decades.”

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