

“A Legacy of Giving”

Michelle Bobrow has spent 32 years serving as an advocate for children in foster care. Like many of CASA of Essex’s advocates, she attributes her steadfastness to a maternal figure - her immigrant grandmother - who not only came to America with nothing to her name, but who also lost her husband early on while raising four dependent children. Michelle says that despite her immense hardship, her grandmother was always “warm and welcoming. She survived against all odds before welfare or social security existed, which allowed the family to be successful. She took whatever was thrown at her and didn’t buckle under it.” Michelle has carried this lesson into the many facets of her life.

Initially, Michelle said that after joining a tutoring program as a volunteer while attending Douglass College at Rutgers University, “[her] eyes were opened. [She] saw that [she] was fortunate to have what [she] did, and [she] 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 trained and began her volunteer work for CASA.

In the field, Michelle is known for her tenacity. If her calls are not returned, she finds another way. “I set my teeth and move forward. 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.” CASA interviewed several people, now adults, who had Michelle as their advocate during childhood. One woman told CASA that having Michelle on her side “was a turning point in her life; she is forever grateful.”

Michelle feels that nothing should be truly unexpected when volunteering on foster cases. She says that life never goes as expected so it is important to have a plan A, B, C and even D! It is especially critical, she said, to figure out what areas the child’s needs are and try to ensure those needs are met. In one case, Michelle was assigned a youth who was skipping school and getting low grades. The school administration was against having him tested, but Michelle “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 could not understand the material. After taking remedial courses, “he learned that he could learn, and he stayed in school and started doing better,” Michelle said.

Michelle’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 as the Vice President of the League of Women Voters, is part of the New Jersey Coalition Against Human Trafficking, and is a board member of the National Council of Jewish Women.

In her spare time, Michelle enjoys time with her family, especially with her “beautiful, talented granddaughter” of whom she is quite proud. She belongs to several book clubs, including that of National CASA/GAL, and CASA of Essex’s Story Seekers. Michelle is also an avid knitter, which also benefits her community in Maplewood as she donates the pieces she makes to local charities.

There is truly no end to the depths of Michelle’s ability to give to others in need. However, spending 32 years serving as a CASA advocate — the average is about four years — makes her incredibly unique.