

Mentors Shaping Lives



Statewide recognition earlier this summer reinforced what thousands already know from direct experience: CASA makes a difference.

The Children's After School Achievement (CASA) program, a Hope College outreach program for more than 20 years, provides academic and cultural enrichment for at-risk first- through fifth-grade students. The program, which runs year-round, is intended to improve the students' academic performance by providing the tools they need to succeed in school.

CASA was named Michigan's "Outstanding Mentoring Program" in the 2010 Governor's Service Award program during a ceremony at the Gem Theatre in Detroit, Mich., on Thursday, June 24. Coordinated by the Michigan Community Service Commission, the

Governor's Service Awards are given annually to individuals, businesses, and organizations to acknowledge their commitment to serving their communities through volunteerism.

"Michigan's volunteers give of their time and talent without thought of praise or recognition," said Governor Jennifer Granholm, who presented the award. "Volunteers are making a real difference in their communities. Recognizing them for their efforts is a simple way of thanking them for their commitment to service and honoring their accomplishments across the state."

The "Outstanding Mentoring Program Award" honors an extraordinary mentoring program or organization that provides high-quality mentoring with significant results for children in Michigan.

"This award means the world to us," said Fonda Green, executive director of CASA. "Thousands of hours go into making CASA outstanding--time from our staff, our volunteers, our young students, our donors, and the college. We are thrilled to share this recognition with all those who love CASA and work so hard to open the doors of education for our children--what a lifetime gift."

Hope students play a key role in CASA. Each school year more than 175 serve as volunteer tutor-mentors in the program, paired one-on-one with a child from the Holland or West Ottawa school systems from September through April to help with homework, practice reading, build relationships through games and other activities, and just generally serve as a

positive role model through the all-important gifts of time and attention.

Lindsay Ter Haar '10 of Holland, Mich., signed on as a tutor during her sophomore year. She became so committed to the program that she also worked with CASA as a classroom assistant during its full-time summer sessions in 2008 and this year (she was abroad in 2009).

"It's a great way to share a passion for learning that the children maybe wouldn't get any other way," she said.

"I think it's a really great way to give back—and it's so easy to do," Ter Haar said. "You just basically have to be yourself, and the kids look up to you."

Ter Haar worked with the same child throughout her time in the school-year program, noting that she appreciated seeing the shy girl that she first met blossom into confidence in addition to gaining academically.

Brian Davis, superintendent of the Holland Public Schools, singled out the mentoring relationships with Hope students and the program's campus location for particular praise, especially for children who might not have older siblings at home, or who might not otherwise have had a chance to experience a college or university.

"Being able to foster that kind of a relationship on a college campus has a very powerful impact on students," said Davis, who

nominated CASA for the award. "It exposes children to higher education in a very positive way, and it provides great role models and great academic support as a result of that."

CASA was established in 1987 by Marge Rivera Bermann and Latin Americans United for Progress (LAUP) and originally housed at First United Methodist Church. CASA moved to Hope in 1989.

During the school year, the students meet after school twice per week in one-on-one sessions with volunteer tutors, most of whom are Hope students like Ter Haar. During the six-week summer session, CASA runs five classes, each led by a certified teacher and assistant, four mornings a week. A total of 150 elementary-age students participated in CASA during 2009-10.

Dr. Jane Dickie, professor of psychology, has valued CASA's impact not only on the children but on the Hope students who work with them. She has observed the difference in particular among the 20 to 30 students who participate each semester for a field placement in conjunction with the college's developmental psychology course.

"It has a clear effect on the young people being mentored, but what may be less obvious is the enormous impact on the college students who are the mentors," she said. "I have seen first-hand the transition from uncertainty

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about how to work with children to clear sensitive and developmentally appropriate ways to help all children."

"I see this placement as an effort to prevent future behavioral and emotional problems, not only in the at-risk children but especially in the future children of our students," Dr. Dickie said. "The long-term effect on hundreds of our Hope College students and their children is astounding. It is not just working with children that creates this effect, but teaching the students how to work with children which CASA does especially well."

A total of 40 finalists were named in eight categories in the Governor's Service Award program, selected from more than 130 individuals, businesses, and non-profit organizations from across the state nominated for their commitment to volunteer service.

In addition to the "Outstanding Mentoring Program Award," the categories in the Governor's Service Award program are the "Governor George Romney Lifetime Achievement Award," the "Corporate Community Leader Award," the "Mentor of the Year" award, the "Outstanding Volunteer Program Award," the "Senior Volunteer of the Year Award," the "Volunteer of the Year" award and the "Youth Volunteer of the Year" award.

The other four finalists in the "Outstanding Mentoring Program Award" category were the Art of Leadership Foundation of Detroit; the Explore Mentor PLUS Program of Alma, Mich.; The Henry Ford Youth Mentorship Program of Dearborn, Mich.; and Lunch Buddies-Central Michigan University Volunteer Center of Mount Pleasant, Mich.

[NOTE: CASA will be having its first-ever CASA Tutor Reunion during the Homecoming Tailgate Picnic at Hope on Saturday, Oct. 23, at noon at Smalenburg Park near Holland Municipal Stadium. For more information, please contact Fonda Green at CASA 616-395-7944, fgreen@hope.edu.]



While CASA emphasizes helping its young charges grow academically, the program also makes priorities of socialization and fun. Each year for Halloween, the college's chapter of Mortar Board has been providing pumpkins for the children to carve and take home.

The Children's After School Achievement (CASA) program at Hope has received a 2010 Governor's Service Award as Michigan's "Outstanding Mentoring Program."

