

## COMMUNITY

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### [Child Advocates honors CASA heroes at 30th anniversary gala](#)

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#### **Courtesy of Laura Fulda**

*Los Altos Hills resident Judge Leonard Edwards, pictured with Child Advocates of Silicon Valley Executive Director Karen Scussel, was among six CASA Heroes and Legends recognized May 21 at the organization's 30th anniversary gala.*

Child Advocates of Silicon Valley honored Los Altos Hills resident Judge Leonard Edwards May 21 for his work on behalf of foster children in Santa Clara County.

Child Advocates provides Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASAs) to foster youth. The nonprofit organization recruits, trains and supports CASAs to work one-on-one with foster children, providing emotional and educational support and ensuring that each child's needs are met and voice is heard while navigating the dependency system. Since 1986, Child Advocates has served more than 15,000 children with the support of 10,000-plus community volunteers.

## ADVOCATE FOR YOUTH

Edwards was among six CASA Heroes and Legends recognized at Child Advocates' 30th anniversary gala. Edwards has devoted much of his career to improving outcomes for children and families. He knows firsthand the deep pain and loss of family and the intimidation of a courtroom. At age 10, he endured his parents' bitter custody battle and, as an adult, Edwards' teenage son died in a car crash.

Edwards served as a Superior Court judge in Santa Clara County for 26 years and for six years as Judge-in-Residence at the Center for Families, Children and the Courts, a division of the California Administrative Office of the Courts. As a judge, he worked in the juvenile court for more than 20 years. As Judge-in-Residence, he served California's courts as a consultant specializing in juvenile and family law, domestic violence, drug courts, mediation, judicial ethics and other issues relating to children and families within the court system.

When asked why he's so driven to help others, Edwards replied, "It's in my DNA. As early as I can remember, I've always wanted to give opportunities to people who haven't had opportunities. I want to break down barriers. I want to let people be all that they can be during their lives."

In 1986, while attending the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges conference, Edwards learned about the impact newly formed CASA programs were having on permanency outcomes for foster children across the country. Starting a CASA program became one of his highest priorities.

"CASAs are the most important people in our community to support our most needy and vulnerable children," Edwards said. "We are a county that wants to solve problems on behalf of our most vulnerable children, and I'm proud to have helped bring the CASA program to Santa Clara County."

Edwards worked alongside Nora Manchester, a former social worker and probation officer, to convince local judges, social workers and other stakeholders that the CASA model could work in Santa Clara County. Later that year, they co-founded Child Advocates.

That same year, Edwards was appointed to the juvenile court. Through his efforts, the Santa Clara County Juvenile Dependency Court was designated a national model by the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges and is one of the most visited in the country. In 1999, Edwards established one of the country's first drug dependency treatment courts, named a Mentor Court by the National Association of Drug Court Professionals.

"Watching these adults be transformed into effective parents was one of the most rewarding parts of my professional life," Edwards said.

Today, Edwards is retired from the bench and works as a consultant, educator and trainer.

## OTHER HONOREES

Other CASA Heroes and Legends honored included Nora Manchester, co-founder of Child Advocates and the agency's first executive director; Moe Whitaker, the first CASA volunteer and former CASA specialist; Ann Whyte, former CASA, former CASA specialist and current CASA mentor; Vilma Palette, former board member and recruiting and training coordinator; and Kevin Gardner, former CASA volunteer and board member.

One of the gala's highlights was when Donaisha, a former foster youth, shared her personal story and the impact her CASA volunteer had on her life. Donaisha grew up with a drug-addicted mother who could not properly care for her and her siblings. There were times when they had no place to live. At age 12, Donaisha was placed in foster care.

"My CASA, Nicole, met me with open arms. She provided a voice for me and brought back my hope," Donaisha said. "Nicole advocated for me at school and helped me make up credits so that I could graduate on time. She helped me fill out college applications and apply for scholarships."

Donaisha, now 21 years old, studies nursing at Spelman College. Her speech received a standing ovation.

"CASAs make a huge difference in the life of a foster child," said Karen Scussel, executive director of Child Advocates of Silicon Valley. "Less than 60 percent of children in foster care in California graduate from high school. But in our county, with a CASA, 80-plus percent of these children complete their high school requirements and over 90 percent continue their education after high school. Donaisha is a tremendous example of the potential of our children when they have the guidance and support of a CASA."

For more information, visit [bemyadvocate.org](http://bemyadvocate.org).