

CASA STAFF

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Leah Varnell, Special
Projects Manager

Charles Wentz, Youth
Alliance Coach Supervisor

THIS ISSUE

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BUILDING ON AN INCREDIBLE LEGACY

Summer marks a season of change. For CASA of Jefferson and Gilpin Counties, this summer signaled a monumental transition in the organization: Leah Varnell, CASA Jeffco/Gilpin Executive Director, retired after 20 years in the role and 25 years with the organization, and Melissa Hellmuth, former CASA Jeffco/Gilpin Director of Operations, stepped in to lead the next era of the organization.

“What excites me most about leading CASA is the opportunity to build upon the incredible work of Leah, our dedicated board and staff, and the amazing volunteers who have helped shape this organization to what it is,” Melissa said.

New Role, Unwavering Enthusiasm and Experience

Melissa started her nonprofit career with CASA Jeffco/Gilpin, spending 5 years in volunteer recruitment and training and 5 years on our development team. She, her husband Chase, and their daughter Maggie then spent 7 years in Reno, NV where Melissa continued to deepen her experience in nonprofit fund development, donor relations, and nonprofit management with Renown Health Foundation and United Way of Northern Nevada and the Sierra.



Leah Varnell (left) and Melissa Hellmuth (right) at this year's Champions for Children Breakfast.

“She came back with renewed passion for our mission, as well as a whole new arsenal of tools to take on the leadership role,” Leah said.

Melissa and her family moved back to Colorado in 2024 and she rejoined our organization as Director of Operations.

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BUILDING ON AN INCREDIBLE LEGACY (CONTINUED)

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“With Melissa’s background, she was well-equipped to hit the ground running,” said Laurie Burkhardt, CASA Jeffco/Gilpin Board Chair. “Add to that her enthusiasm for the organization’s purpose, her contagious energy, and her fresh perspective on where she wants to take the organization going forward and you have the perfect recipe for success.”

Leaving a Strong Foundation

Melissa stepped into the role with years of experience and mentorship from Leah.

“Leah’s mentorship has meant the world to me, and I wouldn’t be where I am today without her guidance,” Melissa said.

Leah was CASA Jeffco/Gilpin’s first employee in 2000, first volunteer in 2001, and then became Executive Director in 2005.

Melissa (left), Laura Markus a long time volunteer (center) and Leah (right) in June 2016.

“Leah took this organization from a very small non-profit, struggling to fund the programs necessary to serve our children, to a well-funded and efficiently run nonprofit with an engaged donor base capable of providing a full range of services,” said Laurie. “Without Leah’s passion, determination, and ingenuity, none of this would have been possible.”

When reflecting on her tenure at CASA, Leah highlighted the following:

- Our commitment to our community and always looking for ways to fill gaps and serve in the ways needed.
- Our decision to expand our services to help emancipating foster youth through our Youth Alliance programming at AVi.
- Developing the strong partnerships and relationships with our stakeholders, donors, volunteers, and supporters that have helped us have the reputation we have.

Leah is excited to have a shorter to-do list in retirement. She also looks forward to seeing how the organization makes the necessary changes to best meet the needs of children in our community.



Melissa (left) and Leah (right) in June 2011.

Melissa has visions to reach even more children and youth who need CASA’s support.

“I’m especially excited to find new ways to support our volunteers, strengthen relationships with the courts and community, and raise awareness, so no child ever feels alone during such an uncertain and scary time in their life,” she said. “There’s so much possibility ahead, and I’m truly honored to help lead CASA into this next chapter.”

Look for the full version of this piece in the upcoming Impact Report.



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LEARNING TO THRIVE - YOUTH ALLIANCE



Jeremy in 2023 at the Grand Canyon.

Jeremy Chavez hasn't had an easy life, but you wouldn't know it if you met him. Positive, kind, compassionate, eager to help—Jeremy is determined to lead a meaningful life and inspire others. Jeremy was connected with CASA when he was 11 years old. He found his groove two years later when John Maxfield became his CASA volunteer.

"He's made all the difference in my life," Jeremy said. "He has been a guiding light—he's shown me how a man should act by just seeing how he operates. He's made me want to give back and share my story."

John and Jeremy continued their relationship when Jeremy joined Youth Alliance, CASA Jeffco/Gilpin's program to support youth emancipating from foster care, to help ease the transition to a healthy and self-sufficient adulthood. Jeremy recently completed the YA Program Completion Fund (PCF), a financial incentive program for any YA participant who is working toward financial independence. He's using his funds to pay down the debt on his truck, as he works to establish enough credit to purchase his first home.

"The most remarkable thing about Jeremy is not that he's smart, resilient, and determined (all of which he is), it's that he's compassionate, even for people in the face of betrayal," John said. "I've seen him be betrayed by people who should have been the closest to him. He never wanted to inflict trauma or pain back on people. I saw that in different shades throughout my involvement with him. I found it remarkable."

For children and youth uncertain about CASA or YA, Jeremy shared, "Not everyone can see outside their world. Look out and accept that help; take advantage of all the resources that CASA and Youth Alliance can give them. I took advantage of everything they could give me. Be open-minded and accept help."

Jeremy is thriving as a self-contracted insurance consultant. Jeremy and John plan to remain lifelong friends and text or talk regularly.

Learn more about their incredible relationship in CASA Jeffco/Gilpin's impact report this fall.

Jeremy in February 2025.



SUMMER VOLUNTEERS OF THE MONTH

CASA volunteers are the heart of our organization, which is why we recognize a volunteer each month who goes above and beyond.

Each month, we shine a light on the incredible individuals who dedicate their time, energy, and talents to make a difference for children who have experienced abuse and neglect. The Volunteer of the Month honorees embody the spirit of service, going above and beyond to support our mission and create a lasting impact. Volunteers are nominated for the recognition by a CASA staff member, their advocate supervisor, peer coordinator, or others involved in their case.

Learn more about our featured volunteers, their motivations, and the remarkable contributions they've made to our organization, by visiting our website (<https://www.casajeffcogilpin.com/volunteer-of-the-month/>). Don't forget to come back every month to learn more about the newest honoree!

Alyce Osher, March 2025



April is National Volunteer Month and we took that as an opportunity to recognize all of our amazing volunteers!

SCAN THE QR CODE TO READ THE FULL STORY



Nancy Sammer, May 2025



Steve Elkins, June 2025



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1st Judicial District

Jan Podoll
Oil & Gas Land Consultant,
Retired

LONG-TIME BOARD MEMBERS RETIRE

Jan Podoll and Mark Duffy, both committed, long-term CASA Jeffco/Gilpin board members, retired from the board this summer.

Jan joined the board in December 2000, serving as board chair for most of her tenure.

“Jan’s passion and willingness to do whatever had to be done in the moment to help us succeed was invaluable,” said Leah Varnell, former CASA Jeffco/Gilpin Executive Director who worked closely with Jan for 25 years. “I knew I could count on her for anything and at any time.”

“We wouldn’t be where we are today without Jan, our longest-serving board member,” said Melissa Hellmuth, CASA Jeffco/Gilpin Executive Director. “Her leadership, vision, and unwavering commitment have guided us through a lot of growth and change—she truly has put her heart and soul into this organization.”

When asked why she has remained so committed to CASA over the years, Jan said, “The mission continues to satisfy my desire to make a difference in the lives of children. Since I have no children of my own, the CASA kiddos are my kiddos!”

Jan Podoll at Leah’s Next Chapter Celebration this summer.



Mark Duffy at this year’s Champions for Children Breakfast.

Mark, who has been involved with our organization for more than a decade, shared that he’s stayed committed because, “I’ve witnessed CASA’s powerful, daily contributions to the most vulnerable kids in our community. Our volunteers, staff, and donors have done amazing things.”

Mark joined the CASA Jeffco/Gilpin board in 2012, holding many roles including board chair and founder of the philanthropy committee.

“Mark has been passionate about our mission,” Leah said. “And he had his eye on the future and where we needed to be focused related to our financial stability and sustainability.”

“Mark’s time on the board has made such a meaningful impact on CASA Jeffco/Gilpin,” Melissa added. “He was instrumental in transforming the way our organization approaches fundraising and helped us build stronger connections with our supporters and community.”

Jan and Mark both still plan to be supporters of CASA Jeffco/Gilpin, just not in an official board capacity.

“Mark, Leah, and I are leaving the program in good hands with Melissa’s leadership and with a strong board to support her,” Jan said.

Thank you, Jan and Mark!

Look for the full version of this piece in the upcoming Impact Report.



100 Jefferson County Parkway
#2505
Golden, CO 80401



AUGUST 27, 4-8 PM

PUTTERS PRIDE

***SCAN THE QR CODE TO GET YOUR
TICKETS AND LEARN MORE!***



***MINI GOLF
COSTUME CONTEST
DOOR PRIZES
PUTTING GAMES
BBQ & DRINKS***

