

Working to end poverty where we live

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By Margarita Ashton

On a recent visit to the CAAS office, I couldn't help being drawn by the sound of light-hearted laughter coming from the Head Start staff room. Allen Kesten, the director of our new Early Learning Mentorship Program, and our education specialists, Lori Harrington and Eidy Williams, were leading teachers in a round-robin exercise. Each tried to remember, and recite, each other's favorite foods. My curiosity at its peak, I was relieved when I learned that my meeting had been postponed and that I was heartily invited to join in the "party"--which was actually a monthly teacher meeting!



Allen Kesten helps Head Start teachers improve their work inside and outside the classroom.

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Congratulations to the CAAS Board members and officers named at the CAAS Annual Meeting!

President:

Roberta Bauer

Vice President:

Suzanne Bremer
Sonja Darai

Treasurer:

Paul Bockelman

Clerk:

Justin Moeling

Virginia Azubuine

Rui Domingos

Bernard Ewah

Valina Jackson

Alice C. Mello Cavallo

Kellee Middlebrooks

Mernaysa Rivera-Bujosa

Jocelyn Scott

Joyce Shortt

Brandy Brooks

Rachel Castleman

John Ciampa

Sarah Slive Davila

Aicha Beinache

At a Turning Point, Setting a Direction

A message from Executive Director Kimberly Smith-Cofield



*“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times...” (Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*)*

I arrived at CAAS, just about two years ago, at a major turning point in the history of the country. We had just suffered through eight years of relentless attacks on all the programs, federal, state, and local, that helps our most vulnerable neighbors to survive and to dream of a better day. Resources that could have lifted families out of poverty had been used to airlift troops to Iraq and Afghanistan. The bottom had fallen out of the real estate market, and where foreclosure used to be a rare occurrence in Somerville (and evictions caused by foreclosure were just as unusual), we started to see a family a week facing eviction because someone sitting at a desk at a lending institution, who did not know them, whom they had never met, was forcing them out of their apartment.

Two years ago, a change of government in Washington led to dramatic changes here in Somerville as well. When new federal funding became available, CAAS jumped at the opportunity to do more for this city. CAAS built on its traditional strengths—keeping people housed, and working together with partners—to prevent dozens of individuals and families from becoming homeless. At the same time, CAAS launched new programs to solve health problems caused by unsafe or unsanitary housing, train people for jobs, and help hundreds of people find the supports they needed (from child care to heating assistance) to make sure a job would actually lift their family out of poverty.

At CAAS, we knew these programs were needed because you told us so. Every three years, CAAS surveys the community about what you think Somerville needs the most, and what should be CAAS’ highest priority in the years ahead. In 2008, you said that keeping people in their homes and helping them find and keep a job, or a better job, were the two goals CAAS should keep in its sights. When the funding became available, CAAS pursued the goals set by you, the community.

CAAS pursues the goals
set by you,
the community.

Now, the stimulus funds have been used up and the government in Washington is going through changes once again. CAAS has proved what we are capable of doing to end poverty in Somerville when resources are great. We will seek new sources of funding

with persistence and creativity. But we have once again reached a turning point, and it is more important than ever that CAAS hear from you about where the agency should direct its efforts.

In 2011—CAAS’ thirtieth anniversary year—you will have many opportunities to let us know what direction you think this anti-poverty agency should take. But please, don’t wait. I invite you to find out more about CAAS by visiting our website or by talking with our dedicated staff and Board members. Then, give us a call, drop us a line, and let us know that you understand that the “community” in Community Action is you.

My best wishes for a happy and historic 2011. ♦

CAAS Annual Meeting 2010

Staff Members, Sasquiere Velasquez, Chris Hosman and Glennys Acosta



Board Members, Roberta Bauer and Paul Bockelman, Steve Grossman and staff.

Cate Johnston, CAAS Intern, and Claudia Arrecis, CAAS Case Manager.



Gleisson Araujo, CAAS Benefits Advocate, Joe Beckmann, Pem Brown and Representative Carl Sciortino.



Kim Smith-Cofield, CAAS Executive Director, Lisa Brukilacchio (CHA) and Ruth Aaron (CASPAR).



Kimberly Smith-Cofield, CAAS Executive Director and her son.



CAAS Annual Meeting 2010



Attendees enjoying the evening!

Members of the Staff, Betty Musto and Ginger Sanders.



Former CAAS Board Members Paul DiPasquale and Teresa Cardoso.



Jeffrey Karon, Finance Director, and Glenn Bouchard, DHCD Program Representative.



Kimberly Smith-Cofield, Executive Director, and the Annual Meeting Planning Committee Members: Mike Gagnon, Adrienne Vigilante, Chrissy Mattson, and Christopher Hosman.



Getting ready to enjoy the food!



Mentors Help Teachers Achieve their Dreams

(Continued from Page 1)

Allen Kesten has introduced our staff to the “mentor-coach” staff development system just being launched at CAAS Head Start. This program assigns ten Head Start teachers to a mentor or coach to help them achieve their own personal professional goals. According to Allen, “Goals can be short or long-term, ranging from wanting to do more science with the parents to incorporating more music and songs into the classroom.” Allen, Lori, and Eidy will each be assigned a few protégés. The mentors will work with their protégés individually, inside and outside of the classroom, for the rest of the school year and into January of 2012.

Allen tells teachers, “This will be your chance to set goals with someone there to give you the resources that you need...it will be a back-and-forth, one-on-one relationship. There will be assistance for people who need Associate Degrees or CDA certification as well as help with writing and English as a second language.” Mentors will also help teachers translate their wealth of everyday classroom knowledge into quality writing and enhanced planning.

Allen’s first goal is to eventually build strong and effective relationships with the teachers, starting by visiting all the classrooms and observing children and teachers. He will chat with teachers informally and slowly get to know them as professionals as well as individuals. By gaining insight into teachers’ unique teaching styles, talents and how these fit with their individual goals, Allen, Lori and Eidy hope to facilitate optimal teacher development. ♦

Coming Back, Giving Back: A Former Head Start Student Serves Families at CAAS

The way Fabia Oliveira remembers it, CAAS Head Start helped her choose her career at the age of five.

“My teachers influenced me to become a helping individual,” Fabia says. “There was a boy in my class who was having a hard time adjusting to school. Every time he was upset in class, he seemed to respond to my attempts to comfort him. I have pictures of our Head Start graduation where I am at the Boys and Girls Club auditorium helping the children find their place on stage.”

This fall, after years of being a full-time parent, Fabia returned to CAAS Head Start as a Family Advocate. She, Family Advocate Jasen Souza (also hired this year), and six veteran staff meet the families of students outside the classroom, often in their own homes. Family Advocates help the low-income families of three-to-five-year-olds find what they need, from free clothing for children to help understanding the health care system. They work with CAAS’ Housing & Benefits Advocates to make sure families can pay rent and utility bills, avoid eviction and stay in their homes.

“From my first day on the job, when the door was opened for me by a kind Family Advocate who effortlessly made me feel welcomed just by her tone of voice and reassurance, I could tell I would like this place,” says Fabia. She observed “the obvious trust and bond that has developed” among the staff and supervisors “over the years of leaning on one another.”

Although she has only worked at CAAS for a few months, Fabia is already making a difference in the lives of families. “On my home visits, I am learning the power of being able to relate to clients, many of whom are stay-at-home moms as I was, and sharing with them the frustrations and joys that come along with that role.” Over half of the CAAS Head Start staff were once parents of children in the program. Someday, some of the parents with whom Fabia is now working may come back and give back to the community too. ♦



Fabia Oliveira (center) comes home to CAAS Head Start

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*Working to End Poverty
Where We Live*

CAAS Helps Families Heat AND Eat

As the cold weather approached, Stephanie (not her real name) and her four children worried. How will we pay the fuel bills this winter? Will we have to go hungry if we want to stay warm?

Stephanie came directly to CAAS to apply for fuel assistance. It was much easier for her than to go to the Fuel Assistance office in Cambridge, which serves the entire area. Stephanie had already received housing help from CAAS' Advocacy Program. When she was behind on her rent and worried that she might have to take her family to a homeless shelter, CAAS assisted her to get a housing voucher from the Department of Transitional Assistance to pay her rent. She knew that this time, CAAS would help her find a way to pay for heat.

"Fuel Assistance recognizes CAAS as a strong, reliable and trustworthy partner," says CAAS Advocacy Director Melissa McWhinney. "For that reason, the Fuel Assistance office provides CAAS

with the necessary paperwork, forms and training to do fuel assistance applications and re-certifications for low-income Somerville residents."

CAAS Housing & Benefits Advocate Gleisson Araujo completed the required forms and gathered the necessary supporting documentation, and then sent those materials to the Fuel Assistance office. In nearly every case--including Stephanie's--CAAS clients receive quick notification that their applications have been approved.

Even if the family owes money to the utility company from the previous year, McWhinney notes, "We are able to use our strong relationships with local energy providers to negotiate on behalf of our clients to make arrangements to ensure they will not be cold this winter." Receiving fuel assistance also makes families like Stephanie's eligible for a discount of up to 25% on their energy bills. Your support for CAAS helps our neighbors heat and eat. ♦

Would you like to receive *CAAS News* on your personal computer? Save a tree! To get this newsletter by e-mail, please write to dfischman@caasomerville.org.