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Working to end poverty where we live



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An interview with Roberta McCluskey

By Margarita Ashton

2011 is CAAS' 30th Anniversary. This is the second in a series of articles about those 30 years.



Thirty years ago, Roberta McCluskey left another job to work at CAAS Head Start.

CAAS' 30th anniversary is a celebratory occasion for all of us. Along with feelings of pride, the anniversary aroused an immense curiosity in me. Roberta McCluskey, our Disabilities/Mental Health Supervisor, is a treasure trove of information. She started her path as a mother of a Head Start student when the program just opened and was eager to tell her story.

Maggie: How was the political and economic atmosphere back then, upon CAAS Head Start's inception?

ROBERTA: Jimmy Carter was president. There seemed...

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Remembering LOU ANN DAVID

This summer, CAAS lost a great friend. Lou Ann David was living in affordable housing at Somerville's Clarendon Hill Towers in the 1980's when the developers threatened to divide the buildings into condominiums. They planned to sell them for more money than the people living there could ever afford. Lou Ann was one of the tenants who stood up to the developers. With help from a CAAS community organizer, they created a Tenants Association that bought the Towers and has kept the apartments affordable ever since. (See "For Over Twenty Years, Saving Homes in Somerville," *CAAS News*, June 2011.)



Grateful and wanting to give back, Lou Ann joined the CAAS Board of Directors. For more than ten years,

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Back to School with Help From CAAS

A message from

Executive Director Kimberly Smith-Cofield



It is always

bittersweet to return to school after a not-quite-long-enough summer. Everyone enjoys a relaxed summer schedule. The children may sleep in, enjoy late breakfasts, participate in community events, swim, ride bikes through the neighborhood, go on day trips with the family, and spend time with friends in camp activities all during the summer months. But for many parents, the predictable structure of the school schedule, the support and the organization that it brings to our families' lives, is often a reality we welcome.

For both student and parent, back-to-school time is a time of transitions. The change may be marked by a new drop-off and pick-up routine, new teachers and the occasional new classmate, and new expectations and responsibilities for both the child and the parent. The transition back to school can be a daunting experience, even for the most prepared student and family.

Here at CAAS, we know the special challenges that many of *our* families face each year as they prepare for this transition in their lives. The families we serve are grappling with additional burdens: trying to manage their finances, maintain employment, keep food on the table, a roof over their head, the utilities on, and medical or healthcare needs addressed. These stressors are real, especially today, facing this most challenging economic environment. What may seem simple to some—overseeing homework, playing or reading with your

child, or advocating on behalf of your child at school—may become so hard to handle it has to be put on the back burner until the family's basic needs have been met.

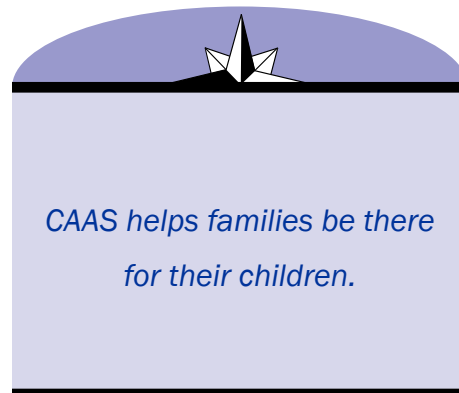
At this key moment and throughout the school year, **CAAS helps families to meet their needs...so they can be there for their children every day.**

We know that if a child has to go home to a dark, cold home and attend to his or her homework on an empty stomach, it is unlikely that child will feel any motivation to succeed. Therefore, partnerships between the CAAS staff, school personnel and parents are grounded in the family's immediate concerns and interests. For some families, this will mean focusing on urgent needs related to food, shelter, health or safety. Other families in less critical

situations may seek to improve their financial stability while participating in parent education or parent support groups.

In either case, CAAS gives parents the welcome opportunity to rid themselves of these life distractions, or at least get them to a manageable point, so they can once again become able to support their child's education and developmental needs.

Your support for CAAS will help families throughout Somerville and Cambridge this fall. Thank you for supporting CAAS. *See you at the CAAS Annual Meeting, October 25!* ♦



I Fell in Love with this Program

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a lot of money for Head Start: the Kennedys were our huge supporters, and the Massachusetts [state government] was never, ever a worry. At that time we had an inter-agency agreement with Wheelock College.

Maggie: How did this agreement originate? Tell me more about it...

Roberta: Back in the late 70's, they realized that in order for preschool to be seen as part of a child's education, and for teachers to be respected as educators, those teachers needed a formal education. So, Head Start gave the regional colleges, like Wheelock, money to get their teachers educated, and that's when the Child Development Associate Program was initiated.

Maggie: How did you get involved with Head Start?

Roberta: Maureen Villa [our current Child Development Supervisor] and I were graduates from Wheelock... My daughter was in childcare and Maureen was the afternoon aide, so she got me involved... My daughter was little and I loved being around her back then [laughter]... No, I love her, she's wonderful! So I left my job and started working for Head Start...I fell in love with the program.



At times, CAAS has been funded to bus children to classes.

Maggie: I learned that during the Carter administration, a lot of work was done to publicize the findings of studies supporting programs such as Head Start, thus sparing us from the Reagan "budget ax." The HighScope Perry Preschool Study proved that for every dollar spent on programs such as ours, \$7.16 was saved!

Roberta: Yes, but still, during the Reagan administration, we lost childcare [all-day care, as opposed to just morning classrooms. CAAS is now able to offer both.].

Maggie: What were other changes then?

Roberta: We had grown from being a predominantly health care program to being one in which education was just as important. Before then, there were no classrooms, just play groups. In its infancy, the program was just supposed to keep kids healthy, so they provided meals for them, and they ensured families access to both health and dental care. Back then, the parents were expected to run the play groups.

Maggie: What about when you started working?

Roberta: Then it was already classrooms. So, in summary, after the playgroup model, it went to a home-based model, then to a solely classroom model, and finally it transitioned to today's comprehensive model which incorporates both home and classroom settings.

Maggie: What about the Family Advocates' role?

Roberta: Their role was



Children from all backgrounds learn and play together.

more focused on just health....Now, the care extends to education, housing, legal and psychological issues....It is no longer just needs based, but also focuses on strengths. We look at what families are already doing that works for them.

Maggie: What happened to CAAS Head Start after Reagan?

Roberta: The economy crashed after the economic boom of the mid-eighties, and Head Start, along with other entitlement programs, went down again. But then George Bush senior came along ['89-'93] and things got actually better... why? Because Barbara Bush said, "George, those kids, they need some literacy!"

Maggie: What about during the Gulf War?

Roberta: Head Start was getting reauthorized after four years, and its budget was attached to the defense budget. So, if you wanted to approve the defense budget, Head Start had to remain. Lots of money came in then. We created a Parent Center, added a literacy specialist position, and started

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I Fell in Love with this Program

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working closely with SCALE, (the Somerville Center for Adult Learning Experiences), where our families could learn reading, writing, math skills, and English.

Maggie: Next comes Clinton...

Roberta: A lot of money comes, things are good, we are loved...now they start researching us, because the Republicans don't like that we are getting so much money without benefits to kids being "proven." They really start regulating and thinking about what it is that kids need to grow, and they demand accountability from us. They develop "standards" for us to abide by...

Maggie: I read that the 1994 Act required ongoing, more stringent research based on these new standards, rather than just relying on studies...it seems that were placed under an even finer microscope...

Roberta: Yes. And this continued on through the George Bush Jr. administration and is part of our self-examinatory philosophy today.

Maggie: Which keeps us on our toes...

Roberta: As well it should!



In September, quiet classrooms fill with lively children.

I left the room with a smile and a bounce on my step, feeling energized to tackle our new "Gold Standard" curriculum, designed to make children's our assessments more accurate and our teaching more intentional. A class of 3-5 year old Head Start children of all races and nationalities was braving the crosswalk on Somerville Avenue, aware of each step they took, teachers calmly guiding them. My smile returned, as this sight reaffirmed the words of Lucia McAlpin, a veteran teacher: "Head Start made a very big effort to reflect the population that we are serving." Another step forward from 30 years ago.

Remembering LOU ANN DAVID

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she never missed a meeting, according to former Executive Director Jack Hamilton. Lou Ann was an ambassador to other tenants, encouraging them to stand up for themselves against injustice. "She was so sincere, so avid about every cause she espoused, and she would never back down from her principles," said her friend and fellow activist Mary Louise Daly.

Eventually, she also served on the Boards of CAAS partner agencies like the Somerville Community Corporation and Greater Boston Legal Services. She served the community while working at New England Conservatory of Music and then at Harvard University, and she continued serving in retirement.

Her brother Evan David says that Lou Ann accomplished all this despite being legally blind. "She told me a story a number of times of how our father

took her out into the streets when she was very young to show her how to safely cross the streets and navigate the city with her limited vision. She said that at that time she knew he was teaching her how to be independent and those lessons would benefit her throughout her life. She went on to live her life as though she had no visual impairment."

A memorial service will be held for Lou Ann David in the Somerville area on Saturday September 24th, at 4:00 p.m. at the Clarendon Hill Presbyterian Church in Somerville. Contact Melissa McWhinney at mmcwhinney@caasomerville.org, or Evan David at redk8@cox.net, for more information.

Please join us there to remember someone who made a great contribution to CAAS and to the Somerville community! ♦

What is a Community Action Agency (CAA)?

Over the course of a lifetime, poverty strikes a surprisingly high proportion of Americans. Illness, disability, unemployment, family break-up, or childbirth can impoverish a family. Regardless of the cause, most families struggle against their predicament and fight to regain self-sufficiency.

Community Action provides an arsenal to wage the fight against poverty and helps families achieve self-sufficiency.

Community Action Agencies (CAA's) are community-based nonprofit organizations, funded mainly by the federal government, in an innovative arrangement that began during the War on Poverty of the 1960's. Approaching four decades of operation, CAA's are recognized and established community catalysts, able to bring together organizations and mobilize local resources to address the problems of the poor and issues of poverty.

Community Action Agencies are flexible, quickly implementing new initiatives and readily integrating new programs. Community Action Agencies are accessible and user-friendly, effectively reaching out and relating to low-income people.

Public/private partnerships are central to the Community Action network, and this unique public/private sector partnership is one of the keys to success. It is designed to tap the knowledge, experience and perspectives of ***all community stakeholders*** — including the poor themselves.

What Does a Community Action Agency Do?

Anti-poverty strategies fall into two basic categories: 1) mitigating the effects of poverty and 2) addressing the causes of poverty. Both are needed, not only for the poor, but to build healthy communities for all citizens, and to nurture a climate and workforce that can support economic growth.

CAA's primarily address the causes of poverty, both at the individual and the community level. While all CAA's include services to alleviate poverty, they do not provide ongoing income support. Instead, CAA emergency services are the "hook" that leads to holistic developmental actions for all members of a family: job training, adult education, child care, health care, fatherhood initiatives, housing, financial literacy, family literacy, violence prevention, pregnancy prevention, and childhood and teenage education programs, to name a few. CAA programs focus on solving the range of issues that keep a family in poverty.

CAA's also work to improve community conditions, giving citizens increased opportunities. Improvement projects are done in cooperation with both local government and the business community. Examples of such community efforts include housing rehab and loan programs, housing developments, small business incubators/loans, child-care centers, clinics, transportation programs, computer labs, drop-out prevention & recovery, job training centers, and rural business development. These programs build community infrastructure and equity in addition to providing opportunities for individuals and families. CAA's also work toward policy and legislative changes that improve opportunities for the poor.

To tailor the remedy to the problem, Community Action offers an extremely wide variety of services. CAA's provide linkages to emergency services, employment and training programs, high school equivalency courses, and vocational education. Community Action programs provide a range of other services to combat poverty, including:

- income management, credit counseling, entrepreneurial training and small business incubators;
- domestic violence crisis assistance, parenting classes, and family development programs; and
- ◆ food pantries, emergency shelters, low-income housing development, and community revitalization projects. ◆

Community Action Agency
of Somerville, Inc

66-70 Union Square
Somerville, MA 02143

For more information visit our website:
www.caasomerville.org or
Email: dfischman@caasomerville.org



*Working to End Poverty
Where We Live*

WE INVITE YOU TO CELEBRATE OUR CAAS ANNUAL MEETING



Date: *October 25th, 2011*

Time: **7:00 PM**

Place: The Somerville City Club
20 Innerbelt Road
Somerville, MA

RSVP: LSeiger@caasomerville.org or
617-623-1392 x165

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in your community!*

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