

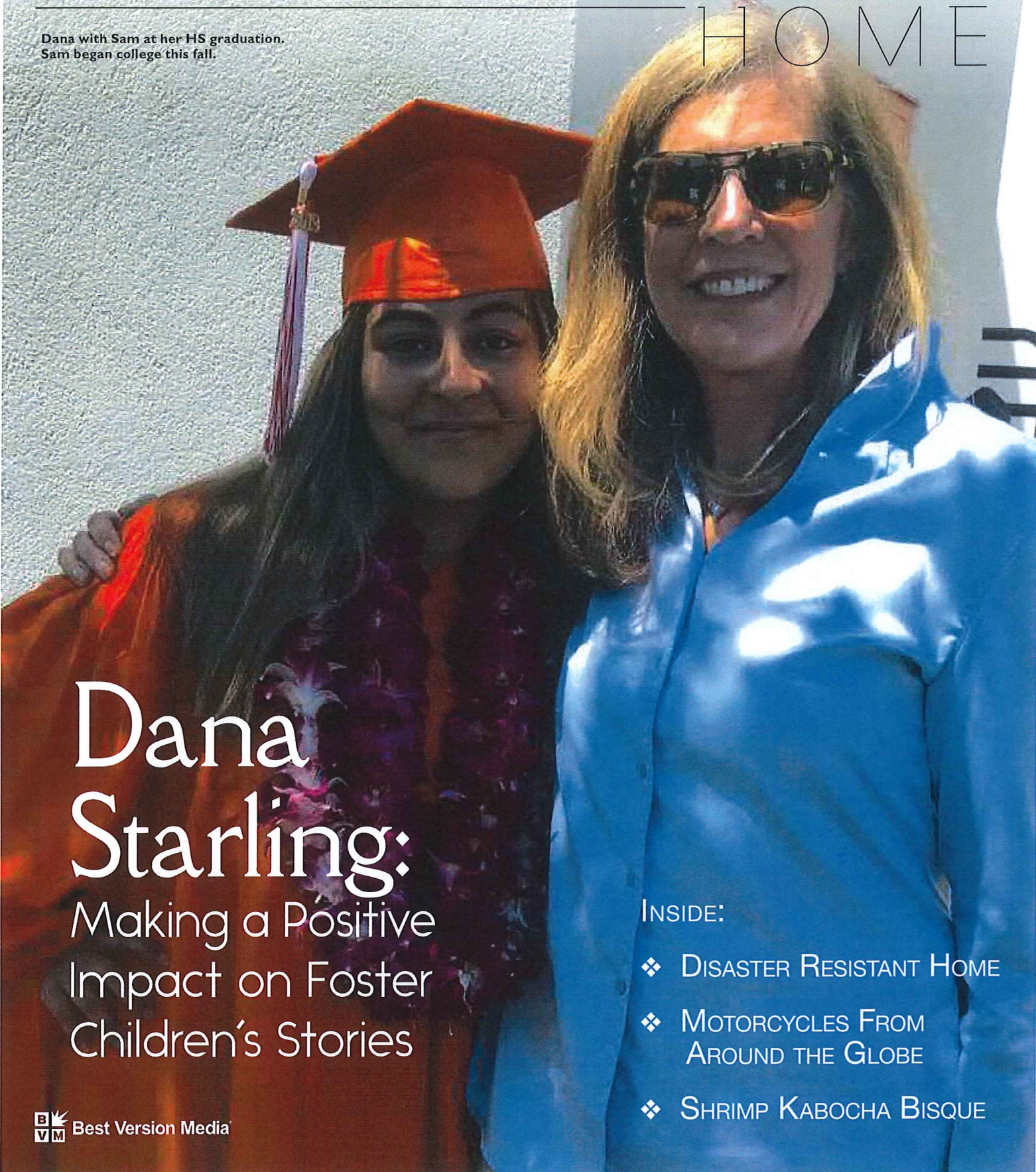
October 2020

A Private Magazine for the Residents of Portola Valley and Woodside

# MOUNTAIN

# HOME

Dana with Sam at her HS graduation.  
Sam began college this fall.



Dana  
Starling:  
Making a Positive  
Impact on Foster  
Children's Stories

INSIDE:

- ❖ DISASTER RESISTANT HOME
- ❖ MOTORCYCLES FROM AROUND THE GLOBE
- ❖ SHRIMP KABOCHA BISQUE



# Dana Starling:

## Making a Positive Impact on Foster Children's Stories

By Abbie Burgess | Photos provided by CASA of San Mateo County

**E**very day, children leave their homes to enter the foster care system. Over 50,000 youth are in foster care in California, the most of any US state. Though full of deeply committed professionals, the overburdened foster care system cannot meet all the needs of the children in the system. That's where Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) comes in, offering a group of highly trained volunteers, appointed by judges to advocate for children in foster care. These community volunteers provide a stable presence and a voice for these children. As young people navigate a period of trauma, uncertainty and change, a CASA volunteer may be the only consistent and caring adult presence in a child's life. While meeting weekly, volunteers provide companionship and consistency while getting to know the child and encouraging their special interests.

### **The Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) Story**

CASA of San Mateo County pairs children in the foster care and juvenile justice systems with community volunteers who provide one-on-one support, mentoring and advocacy in the courtroom and beyond. These caring and dedicated volunteers— from all walks of life – help children heal from trauma and access the services they need to thrive. CASA volunteers make sure their basic rights and essential needs don't get overlooked or ignored by the system. They remain with the child until the case is closed and the child is placed in a safe, permanent home. With the help of CASA, their stories have a better ending.

One such CASA volunteer is local resident Dana Starling, who has spent over a decade volunteering for the cause.

### Changing a Foster Child's Life for the Better

Dana became aware of CASA while trying to help a young relative who was in the home of a drug addict at the time. She contacted Judge Leonard Edwards, who first told her about CASA. "I was amazed how generous he was to take my phone call," she remembers. "He gave me great advice on the legal aspects of becoming a legal guardian. I was unable to adopt the young relative but his wisdom and compassion stayed with me."

Judge Edwards brought a branch of the national CASA movement to California by establishing a program in Santa Clara, Dana explains. He realized that foster youths are in a very unstable environment, frequently moving in and out of different foster homes. Furthermore, they are frequently separated from their siblings and the timeline to when - or even if - they can be reunited with family is unknown. "Judge Edwards realized that a CASA program could be a great asset to a child. The volunteer would follow the child for as long as they are in the foster care program. The CASA volunteer program requires about 20 hours of training before you select a youth. Then the volunteer is expected to see the youth once a week."

After her own children were in college, Dana signed up for the CASA program in Santa Clara County in 2010. "This was the year that AB12 was being introduced to the community," she says. Assembly Bill (AB) 12 is the law that extends foster care to age 21 in California. "Before AB12, foster youth were discharged into the community at the age of 18. How many



young adults at 18 are able to find work, afford housing or even a college education?"

Dana's CASA advisor let her choose a preferred age group and gender to work with and allowed her to read the files of the youths before committing to becoming an advocate. "I wanted a female teenager with the potential of going to college," she recalls. "I wanted to take full advantage of AB12."

### A Pivotal Difference

As the foster youth she was paired with became ready to enter college, Dana became aware of the organization Silicon Valley Children's Fund

Continued >>>

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### BLUE VAULT OF HEAVEN - PANO VIEW VILLA IN HAWAII

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Stunning 5,000 SF, 4 bedroom, 4-1/2 bath Lucky Bennett designed set back "beachfront" home sits on one full acre of tropical gardens, lawns, free-form heated salt water swimming pool with waterfalls and circular Jacuzzi, offering expansive 180 degree views of the Pacific and the Island of Maui beyond. This property is unmatched in every way. It is by far the closest of all others to stunning full-service Pauoa Beach and so many very rarely ever offered but so highly prized amenities most of which are just 50 yds away from your own secure beach gate than any at Pauoa Beach or anywhere else on the Big Island - and you are literally in full view of these fabulous amenities from your own huge 2,500 sf lanai!

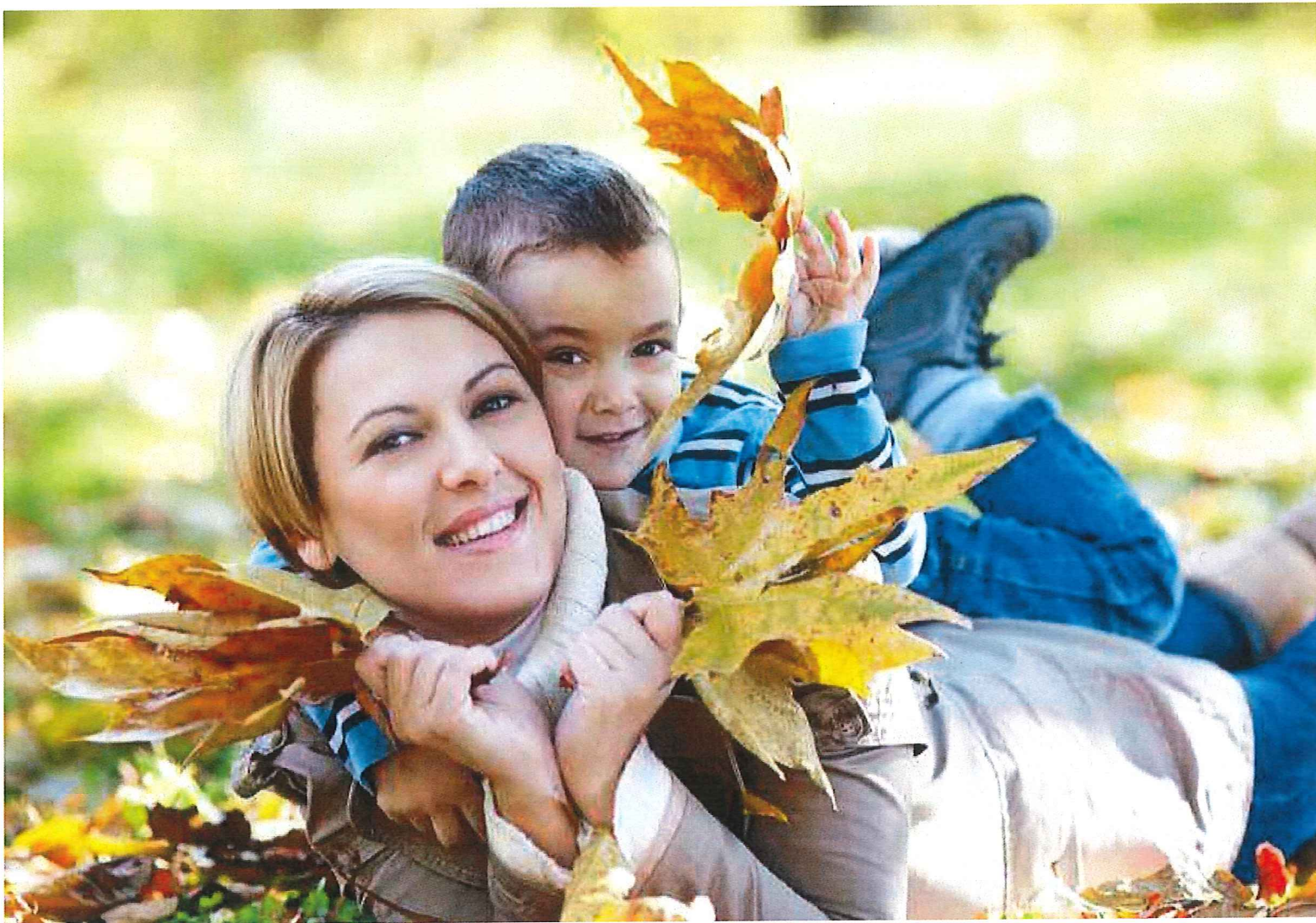
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Valley Children's Fund that provided the YES scholarship for foster youth. The scholarship program is now called Pivotal. "Their goal is to make the student a productive, educated person in the community," she says, adding that she volunteered there for several years as an educational mentor in addition to her work with CASA. "It is a great program if you don't have the time to be a CASA advocate."

#### **Volunteers from all Walks of Life**

She stayed with the Santa Clara County CASA organization until 2018, becoming a CASA Mentor, or Peer Advocate, advising many other CASA volunteers. Santa Clara County CASA serves about 1,000 foster youths throughout the county and all the way down to Gilroy. "I was able to advise all types of CASA volunteers - from people with full time careers to grandparents and everything in between," Dana says. "The volunteer program is flexible depending on the needs of the youth. An advisor will help you select the child that fits your time and availability." The needs of the youth often vary based on age. Many older teens like connecting with text, email, phone or a short visit, Dana says. This helps them fit mentorship into a busy schedule that may include after school activities, working part time, and taking public transportation.

Now, Dana continues her work with CASA through CASA of San Mateo County. She joined the chapter as a CASA volunteer in 2016. "My last youth from Santa Clara turned 21 and I wanted to work with a new youth who lived closer to me," she explains. The San Mateo County chapter serves about 200 foster youths. "Both programs are great but very different. Both counties have services and programs to supplement the costs and activities for your foster youth." The most important thing is the same throughout all CASA chapters: the one on one time volunteers spend with their foster youths.

"I have learned so much from my experiences as a CASA volunteer: I have been lucky to mentor eight teens that have entered college," Dana shares. "It is very different from raising your own children. I have such great respect for the youths I have mentored. Some of them wake up at 5:00 AM to catch several buses to their college or they ride their bike. They grow up fast and learn to be very independent."

Dana's experiences with the organization have given her back at least as much as she has put in. "Some of them have had to deal with many issues but knowing that someone cares for them, no matter what the circumstances, can make a great difference in one's life. It has for me."



## Save the Date for Connect to Protect

November 18, 2020 at 7pm

Connect to Protect is a silent auction and virtual benefit that you won't want to miss. Join in this inaugural fundraiser that offers the opportunity to support CASA of San Mateo County and the children in the foster care and juvenile justice systems. In addition to a traditional fund-a-need auction, you will be able to bid on opportunities to connect with interesting, enlightening, and for most of us, otherwise inaccessible "specialists" for a unique virtual experience such as:

- Have an esteemed author join you for an engaging discussion that provide new insights
- Enjoy a virtual mini-training session or get tips or stories from a retired professional athlete

Follow CASA of San Mateo County social media platforms for the latest updates, including introductions to our specialists and experiences available for bidding.

## Become a CASA Volunteer

CASA volunteers are adults 21 years of age or older who come from all walks of life. They are community members who care about children and who form a personal connection, a connection that for many is life changing.

Volunteers are expected to remain with a child for 18 months unless the case closes before that time. CASA volunteers connect with their youth weekly, spending four or more hours a month with them.

The first step to becoming a CASA volunteer is to attend an orientation. After orientation, you will complete an application and schedule a screening interview with a CASA staff member. After the interview, if there is a mutual fit, you will be invited to begin training.

Winter Training begins January 12.

Training is held virtually through Zoom and CASA University over a period of four weeks.

Volunteers who successfully complete the 5 courses and attend all 6 classes are sworn in by a judicial officer at a graduation ceremony.

Zoom sessions are held from 6-9pm during a weekday.

For more information, please visit [www.casaofsanmateo.org](http://www.casaofsanmateo.org).