

CASA's garden aims to ease stress of children in court system



CASA executive director Rita Facchina and Master Gardener Nancy Kuhajda cut the ribbon Friday on the new CASA Children's Garden at the River Valley Justice Center, 3200 W. McDonough Street in Joliet. (Susan DeMar Lafferty / Daily Southtown)

By **Susan DeMar Lafferty**
Daily Southtown

AUGUST 8, 2017, 8:20 AM

A few years ago, Rita Facchina had two boys in her office at the River Valley Justice Center awaiting the court's decision about their future.

When they learned they would not be going home with their mother, one said to her, "This is the worst day of my life," she recalled.

It was then, Facchina said, she was determined to find a way to make a court experience a bit easier for children.

"If they get bad news, how can we make it better?" said the executive director of CASA of Will County — Court Appointed Special Advocates

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at the juvenile court facility at 3200 W.

On Friday, surrounded by Master Gardeners from the University of Illinois Extension Service, Facchina cut the ribbon on the new CASA's Children's Garden, describing it as "an awesome place for kids to relax and destress."

CASA is a group of about 100 volunteers who serve 350 abused and neglected children as guardian ad litem, providing comfort, hope and a voice for them as they go through the court system.

"Some of these kids have been removed from their homes with only the clothes on their backs and they don't know where their next home will be. They are in court for many hours waiting for the outcome," Facchina said.

She mentioned her idea for a garden to Tricia Simpson, Midwest Public and Government Affairs Manager for ExxonMobil, who had become involved with CASA and wanted to make a meaningful contribution.

Simpson enlisted her friend and Master Gardener Nancy Kuhajda from the Extension office to create a place of peace and serenity for scared and confused kids.

"The mission of Master Gardeners is to help others learn to grow, but we also know the restorative power of a garden," Kuhajda said, adding that they put in over 400 volunteer hours to create this intricately detailed garden, beginning in the spring of 2016.

"Every plant, every structure was donated by the community," she said, and designed with many creative, kid-friendly touches.

Within the mix of brightly colored annuals and perennials, there is a tic-tac-toe game painted on a stone, with decorated rocks for markers, a small sand box and other toys, with cute little figures and colorful blocks strewn among the flowers.

A small library was built from scratch from recycled materials, and stocked with books, so every child can take one home, Kuhajda said.

Kids can sit at a picnic table, hang out in a little playhouse, stop to sniff the lemon verbena, peppermint or dill or watch hummingbirds at the bright red feeder.

All the plants — the tropical milkweed, asters, and salvia — are there to attract bees and butterflies, making the garden a "certified waystation" for Monarch butterflies.

For Kujahda, one of the "most interesting" features is the turf that covers the ground.

"You are standing on West Point Military Academy's former football field," she said, adding that it was purchased from Repurposed Materials. Not only it is a soft, cushy surface, but it requires no maintenance and drains well, she said.

Kujahda said the Master Gardeners typically don't do maintenance projects, but they will continue to take care of CASA's Children's Garden.

"This is a very special project in a very special situation," she said.

On opening day, the garden was kid-tested and approved.

"It's very beautiful. It's really a fun place for kids," said Ronneigh Turro, who was checking out the books and playing tic-tac-toe with her younger sisters. The youngsters are the nieces of CASA attorney Jennifer Lynch.

The "smelly leaves" and the "dill pickle forest" were the favorites of Rubiegh Turro.

Matt Chignoli, whose mother is CASA volunteer Jennifer Chignoli, said he thought it was "great," especially the bubble wands.

"I love it. It's beautiful out here," said Melanie Collins, who works for CASA. "It's more tranquil than the waiting room and much more kid-friendly."

"We hope it really changes lives," said Kujahda, as she assisted Facchina in cutting the ribbon.

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