

# Hope for Kids reaching out to Geauga children

By JOAN DEMIRJIAN

Children in Geauga County who are abused, neglected or at risk are being supported by Hope for Kids Geauga. There are many children who need help, said Bainbridge resident Stephanie Weemhoff who is president of the group.

The organization was formerly known as Friends of CASA for KIDS and was originally formed in 2001 to raise funds for children in CASA for KIDS, a program of the Geauga County Juvenile Court.

Mrs. Weemhoff was the developer and director of the CASA for KIDS program in its beginnings. CASA volunteers are advocates or guardian appointed by the court to be advocates for individual children.

The late Geauga County Juvenile Court Judge Charles "Chip" Henry saw a need for volunteers to get involved and founded the CASA for KIDS program in Geauga County, and asked Mrs. Weemhoff to oversee it.

CASA is a national organization, she said. There is a mandate that the court appoint a guardian ad litem for each child to look out for his or her best interest. That person can be an attorney or a volunteer.

Friends of CASA for KIDS got together in 2001 to raise money for the children who needed additional opportunities available to them they would not normally have, such as camp, tutoring, gymnastics and horseback riding, Mrs. Weemhoff said. Friends of CASA provided the funding, as well as funding for volunteers to get additional training.

In 2017, the Friends of CASA board recognized that there were many juveniles in the county who were not receiving help because they were not involved with the courts, Mrs. Weemhoff noted. "We realized there are so many other kids at risk and there was a need to expand to help all the children not just those children involved in the courts."

In January of 2017, the group became a

nonprofit and changed its name to Hope for Kids Geauga, Mrs. Weemhoff said. The key was to broaden the mission to provide support for all abused, neglected and at-risk children in the county and to bring awareness about children who are not necessarily in the courts. The organization continues to support the children in the courts.

"We started partnering and putting our name out," she said. The group partners with Geauga County Job and Family Services' Children's Services, the Family First Council, Special Services of Geauga County and with Ravenwood Mental Health. "Those are the organizations that identify the children who are abused or at risk and they recommend programs that they would benefit from."

**"Part of this has to do with the rise in the opioid epidemic," Mrs. Weemhoff said. "So many kids are affected by the heroin and opioid epidemic in Geauga County. They are being removed from their homes, at risk from neglect and family dysfunction and who are in need.**

"The goal is to improve children's self esteem, confidence and academics by giving them the positive experience that makes a life-long difference," Mrs. Weemhoff said.

So many families have issues involving addiction, abuse, mental health, domestic violence and sexual abuse, she said.

In some cases, the Hope for Kids Geauga sends the children to arts and music classes, summer camps and tutoring programs. They even buy clothes for prom nights. "We bought senior yearbooks for students and we have sent some to cooking classes. We

have paid for seventh- and eighth-grade class trips. We've paid for braces for children. This really maintains a resiliency for these kids. We can help them catch up and have a positive experience," Mrs. Weemhoff said.

Some are in foster care, living with other family members, in a residential setting or who are being maintained at home with parents. "We are trying to make a difference even by sending the family to YMCA camp to create a union. We help provide opportunities they would not otherwise have," she said.

Research shows that children who engage in positive experiences are helped to be a productive part of society with good self-esteem and resiliency, and reduces the possibilities that they will engage in risky behavior such as drugs and delinquency, she said.

Hope for Kids Geauga wants every young person to have opportunities that will strengthen them to become productive adults. The mission is to help individuals from birth through 22 years of age. "There are kids in foster care and we know we can help them when they age out of the foster care system," Mrs. Weemhoff noted.

"We have provided funds to the Chagrin Falls Park Community Center in Bainbridge for building up its new library area. It is a place where children can sit, read and take out a book," she said.

Upcoming fundraisers include an annual golf outing on Aug. 5 at the Chagrin Valley Country Club. "Last year, the funding helped to assist 570 children in Geauga County," she said. "We provided \$46,000 in donations in 2018 and we hope to increase that.

"We get donations from individuals, family foundations, corporations as well as through the Rotary and Jaycees," Mrs. Weemhoff said. She spoke recently to the Rotary Club of Chagrin Valley.

For more information on the group or making a donation, visit [www.hopeforkidsgeauga.org](http://www.hopeforkidsgeauga.org).