An A-Muse-ing Feline

Skittish cat inspires alumna to write book supporting children in foster care

A **gray-and-white cat** named Foster had been the unofficial mascot of the Piedmont CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocates for Children) office in Charlottesville for nearly 10 years when Longwood alumna **Kari Dunnavant Joyner** joined the staff in January 2025.

Everyone else at the organization, which provides one-on-one support for children in foster care, saw Foster simply as a cat—albeit a beautiful and very skittish one. But Joyner saw something more.

In her efforts to get Foster to trust her and accept being petted—a goal Joyner pursued despite years of unsuccessful attempts by other CASA staff—she realized that Foster had a lot in common with many of the children CASA was working to help.

"One day, as I was trying unsuccessfully to coax Foster closer, it hit me: This is what so many of the children we serve in foster care go through," said Joyner '08, M.S. '12 (education/school library media), who is Piedmont CASA's recruitment and training coordinator.

"Despite the compassion and consistency offered by CASAs and foster families, some kids remain understandably hesitant to trust or connect. They've lived through trauma, abuse, neglect and uncertainty, and those experiences don't just vanish when an adult shows up for them."

In that epiphany, Joyner again saw something more: potential for spreading the word about CASA's mission and enlisting support for the organization. It's no surprise that, as a former teacher and school librarian, Joyner chose to realize that potential by writing a book.

Foster: The CASA Cat is a children's book that uses CASA's "cautious, beloved office cat as an allegory for the emotional journey of children in foster care," said Joyner. "It tells a story that helps children understand why some of their peers might seem quiet, withdrawn or slow to warm up, and how patience, empathy and kindness can make all the difference. I also hope the book provides a perfect way for our advocates to connect with their kids and explain their role."

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Although it's a children's book, adults have embraced *The CASA Cat* as well, donating $2,200 to print enough copies to give one to each of the nearly 200 children CASA serves and to offer some for sale online, with all proceeds going to Piedmont CASA. The donations came from Joyner's former colleagues in the Charlotte County Public Schools and her fellow Rotarians in the Charlottesville Rotary Chapter.



Inspired by Piedmont CASA's adopted office cat, Foster, Kari Joyner wrote a children's book to help children understand the complex emotional challenges navigated by children in foster care.

Joyner clearly is passionate about her work with CASA, which includes attracting and onboarding new volunteers, and strengthening community partnerships.

"The most challenging part is the growing need for volunteers to advocate and the sheer volume of child abuse and neglect cases at the moment. We have a substantial number of kiddos on our waitlist for an advocate, and that weighs heavily on my heart," she said. "The most fulfilling part is knowing that our work can really change the direction of a child's life. Our data is clear: Kids with CASAs spend less time in foster care, have improved health and therapeutic outcomes, and do better in school.

"I loved teaching, but I reached a point where I knew I needed a new challenge," said Joyner, who spent the first 17 years of her career at Randolph-Henry High School. She was a history/secondary education major...career she's had so far. She was a history/secondary education major as an undergraduate at Longwood, and she gives her Longwood education at least part of the credit for the fulfilling career she's had so far.

And what of the real Foster, now immortalized in print?

She's well-taken care of and loved by the CASA staff, but Joyner says Foster still hasn't let anyone pet her.

"She might accept a treat or let you sit nearby, but always on her terms and always at a distance. She loves watching us through the office windows and lounging on the fire escape or roof where she can keep an eye on us."—*Sabrina Brown*