

**1st Place on 2nd Street
Eagle Award Winner**

By

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When we're young, we all make bad decisions. For most, the consequences of those poor life choices can be a stern talking-to or, if we're lucky, a disapproving glance from our parents. Even those of us whose parents have sent us packing into the world after graduating high school can rely in some way on them if more dumb decisions cause our lives to go briefly awry. But what happens to those whose circumstances have found them without the luxury of a loving and caring home life? What happens to those who, after years in foster care, discover that there isn't a safety net for them? Hesitant to trust and afraid to fail, they can easily find themselves couch surfing or homeless and vulnerable to drugs, crime, or prostitution. These were the kids in which the CASA, Court Appointed Special Advocates, of the 7th Judicial District were investing their time, resources and hearts. And it was kids like these that gave CASA the idea for their project, 1st Place on 2nd Street in Montrose, Colorado.

In 2016, CASA of the 7th began thinking about a next step for the young adults – kids, really, from 18 to 24 years old who were aging out of foster care. They realized that all too often, the newfound independence of emancipating from a foster family comes with the absence of resources. When you lack resources, coming up with a security deposit, obtaining a driver's license, or learning the skills that can land you a job can be a daunting task. Initially, CASA had hoped to construct a few tiny homes with the help of their youth. They built one unit and the process was a success. CASA realized that the youth they serve are eager to be engaged and to learn new things. But they needed more units, and faster.

CASA began working with the Colorado Division of Housing on a development plan that included finding a site, creating a construction budget an application for a grant and project-based rental vouchers and a loan from the Impact Development Fund for acquisition of the site. They embarked on a fund-raising campaign, paid off their acquisition loan in four months and in another four had \$1.2 million committed to the project. They worked with architect Will Snowden to design the project, found a local project manager to oversee construction and train CASA's youth in learning trades on the project. Six young people worked closely with the contractor, giving them an edge in finding employment after construction was completed.

The result is an 8-unit project in two fourplexes, each of which has two 1-bedroom and two 2-bedroom units. The two-bedroom units can be used by siblings or unrelated youths in a cohousing situation. The units all have full kitchens and bathrooms. There is a community room on the site for games, group meals, and movies. Above the community room is a 2-bedroom unit for the project's "Good Neighbor", a CASA staff person who facilitates community governance,

assists with job preparedness, problem solving, and conflict resolution. The “Good Neighbor” also coordinates community meals and with members of the community who are interested in the success of the residents.

Most remarkable is the funding for the project that has contributed to its continued success. The Colorado Division of Housing provided 12 project-based vouchers and a \$500,000 grant, the City of Montrose waived tap and building permit fees and CASA received grants from regional, national and even international foundations. CASA made three presentations to “The Giving Club”, a group of 150 women in Montrose who meet quarterly to choose causes or projects to support with grants and was turned down each time. After the third denial, Carlton Mason, CASA’s Executive Director, got a call from a woman who was at the meeting and was interested in the project. After meeting for coffee, hearing more about the youth CASA serves and the plans for the project, she wrote a check for over \$50,000. While this is an incredible act of kindness and generosity, four *other individuals* from Montrose contributed over \$50,000 each. The outpouring of support that the project received from the community is a testament to the important work that CASA of the 7th is doing. The vouchers provide revenue to assure coverage of operating costs and the grants have eliminated the need for funds for debt service.

Too often, the young people that CASA works with and advocates for end up homeless or worse, missing. 1st Place on 2nd Street is now home to 12 young people. That’s 12 kids with a better chance of escaping the cycle of abuse and neglect, 12 kids who will be better prepared for the challenges that lie ahead and 12 kids who aren’t homeless or at risk of slipping through the cracks of life. 1st Place on 2nd Street will be a resource for youth coming out of foster care and at risk of homelessness in Montrose for years to come and is a model that other communities can follow.