



# ALLISON STRONZA

**Occupation:** Executive Director, Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) of Central Virginia

**Hometown:** Bedford, Va.

## How did you react when CASA won the nonprofit and Small Business of the Year award given out by the Lynchburg Regional Alliance this year?

I was very excited to accept the award in the nonprofit category. When they called our name yet again for the overall category, I was surprised and overjoyed. Not only did we get the stage for a few minutes, we also received a \$6,000 advertising package that will allow us to spotlight our mission in the community to recruit new volunteers, donors and board members.

## What is your top goal for CASA in the coming years?

My two main goals are to eliminate our waiting list so that no child who has been abused or neglected will ever have to go without an advocate and to build our financial sustainability by increasing our fundraising income through individual donations.

## What does a typical day at work look like for you?

After a cup of coffee (first things first) and checking mail, email, and messages, I typically touch base with my staff and tackle my to-do list. Some days are filled with committee meetings, staff meetings, and board meetings; some are quiet, focused days where I can work on a large grant or get my creative juices flowing on new marketing content. Every day is a little different.

## What do you do to stay organized?

I use a project management tool called Asana to help me track tasks. I group them by event or category and put due dates on everything. I'm a very visual person so I also have a wall in my office that is painted with dry erase paint where I can write down ideas or current tasks that need to stay in the forefront of my mind.

## What were your early career days like?

When I started at Rush Homes, I was fresh out of college and almost finished with my MBA. I was one of two staff members. Our development director was part time. I learned as much as I could from her and attended workshops on housing development, board development, fundraising...

anything I could find. I did a little bit of everything which helped me learn so much about nonprofits as a whole.

## What lessons have you learned?

I have learned to ask for help. Someone has likely been in a similar situation and can offer words of wisdom or volunteer to help. There's absolutely no reason to suffer through challenges alone.

## What excites you the most about the work that you do?

Hearing the success stories from our volunteers and staff. The work that our volunteers do for these children is incredible. Just this morning, one of my staff members told me about a six-year-old girl on one of her cases that was finally going to be adopted, and she was so excited that she was telling everyone in the restaurant we were in. This little girl had spent three years in foster care in four different homes. Had it not been for her court appointed special advocate (CASA) fighting for what was in her best interest, this likely would have had a very different outcome.

## What is your leadership style?

I am very people-oriented and like to include staff in decisions that are made. It is important to me to have our team provide input and put out ideas for discussion rather than me simply deciding what I think is best. Our staff members have decades of experience in child welfare and nonprofit work. Leaving them out of the decision-making process simply wouldn't make sense.

## What are some ideals or strategies that you feel are the most important for a leader?

Be genuine and know your employees. What makes them tick? What excites them? What frustrates them? Everyone needs to be heard so make sure you are present and listening. Also, you can't possibly be an expert on every subject but know who is and learn from them. Create an inner circle of experts and ask them to be your mentors and sounding board.

## Are there any unique challenges that women in business face?

Work/life balance is challenging for everyone, but women often have added responsibility with children, which can be hard. I remember when my first child was born and how emotionally draining it was to go back to work after only six short weeks at home with her. But with time, I adjusted into a new routine and the hormones subsided. Having a flexible job with the ability to work at home on occasion made all the difference for me.

## What is your advice for facing those unique challenges?

Do the best you can and again, ask for help. There will be days when you are rocking your job but your house is a mess and you feel like a rotten mom. There will be other days when you feel like mom-of-the-year and your house is spotless, but you have piles of paperwork on your desk, 100 unanswered emails, and days of back-to-back meetings. You just have to give it your best and ask for help when you can. Don't compare yourself to other working moms. No one has it all together no matter how much you think they do.

## What's life like outside of work?

I spend a lot of time with my husband, kids, and other family members. We love going camping and having cookouts at each other's houses. Most of my family members live in Bedford so we are close-knit. During the kids' school year, it can be a bit hectic with my daughters' dance lessons and son's soccer practice and games. But I love watching them do something they are so passionate about and are quite good at as well. I also run—not as much as I used to since taking this job a few years ago—but I have completed four full marathons, 11 half marathons, and multiple shorter distance races. It's good therapy!

## What do you envision for Lynchburg?

I envision nonprofits and businesses collaborating together to help solve the issues facing our community such as child abuse and neglect, mental health services, addiction and recovery, affordable housing and many more. We all need to work together and do our part. If you and/or your company are not volunteering, donating, providing grants, or otherwise contributing to your local community...what are you waiting for? Everyone wins when we all work together.

## What's the best piece of advice you've ever received?

My parents have always told me that I could be anything I wanted to be. They have been my rock and my cheerleaders all my life. With their support, I was the first one in my family to graduate from college. They taught me to work hard and help others. I love the quote "Dwell in possibility." I have it on a wooden plaque in my office so I see it every day. Every challenge is an opportunity.

## What one piece of advice would you share with others?

"Be the change you wish to see in the world." Get involved in something bigger than you. Whether that is advocating for children, creating a healthier planet, or protecting animals...find your passion and leave the world better off than when you arrived. That doesn't mean you have to work at a nonprofit—you can volunteer or donate as well. Make a difference and leave a legacy...don't waste your short time on earth. 