

Interview with Pilar Ortiz-Waters SCAN Volunteer Coordinator



How did you first get involved with SCAN?:

I first got involved with SCAN while serving as the Program Director for a Family Resource Center in Southside of Richmond. Because the center partnered with SCAN, I encouraged us to deepen that collaboration since so many of our families could benefit from their support. I worked closely with Kanika McBride in Community Programs and with Lucy Rimington, and together we found thoughtful ways to meet families' needs more intentionally. I also regularly referred parents to SCAN's Family Support Program and to the Circle Preschool Program when they needed additional trauma-informed support.

I also made a point to invite SCAN to table at our community events, knowing how valuable it was for families to meet the SCAN team and learn about resources face-to-face. SCAN's involvement helped build trust and made those events feel even more supportive and connected.

One experience that truly showed me the impact of SCAN's work involved a parent I referred to Kanika. I had the privilege of watching this parent grow, gain confidence, and become the parent she always wanted to be. Seeing her transformation over time was incredibly meaningful, and we still stay in touch! She's now involved with SCAN as an ambassador, using her voice to support other families.

Another impactful collaboration was the parent-and-child playgroup Lucy and I created on food pantry days. Families often waited outside for hours in challenging conditions, and our goal was to offer a warm, safe space where parents and children could take a break, bond, and have positive moments during a stressful day. Experiences like that showed me the heart of SCAN's mission and the strength of true community partnership.

What has your life/work experience been that brought you to SCAN? What is your current role?

My life and work have always revolved around supporting children and families. Over the years, I've had the privilege of serving in roles that taught me resilience, empathy, and what it truly means to walk alongside people during some of their most vulnerable moments. Many of my jobs have been high-stress but incredibly rewarding. From coordinating emergency medical evacuations for families overseas, to serving as a Volunteer Director and later Program Director at a local nonprofit that brought children to the U.S. for lifesaving surgeries that were not available in their countries. During that

time, I also coordinated and traveled with specialized surgical teams to Central America to conduct clinics for children with cardiac, orthopedic, and craniofacial needs.

I've taught high school Spanish and French and worked at the Children's Hospital of Richmond supporting children with severe craniofacial deformities who required complex surgical care. Many of the children I worked with there came through the same nonprofit pipeline I had helped build, which made the work feel deeply interconnected and meaningful. I also created a family resource center in Southside of Richmond from the ground up, an experience that solidified my desire to work with an organization that has a proven track record of truly supporting families and children.

All of those experiences, both lived and professional, prepared me for SCAN in meaningful ways. I've always been drawn to serving underserved and vulnerable communities, and I care deeply about helping families access resources they may not know how to find on their own.

Today, I serve as SCAN's Volunteer Coordinator. My role is to recruit and support volunteers across SCAN's programs, and right now my primary focus is CASA volunteers because more than 130 children are waiting for an advocate. Every new volunteer represents another child who will finally have someone in their corner, and helping make those connections is something I'm truly grateful to be part of.

What inspires you to stay involved with your work at SCAN?

What inspires me to stay involved with my work at SCAN is the urgent need for CASA volunteers. I'm deeply committed to this community, and I've always been driven by a desire to "fix" gaps where children are waiting for support. Right now, we have more cases (which really means more children) on the waitlist than we have volunteers and closing that gap motivates me every single day.

I'm passionate about connecting helpers to one another so this work can happen more quickly and more effectively. Seeing people step forward with a genuine desire to make a difference is incredibly inspiring. The volunteers I recruit want to show up for children who cannot advocate for themselves, and that kind of compassion and courage is exactly what the world needs more of right now.

I truly believe we have a shared responsibility to support those who need us. Being part of an organization that empowers people to do just that keeps me committed to this work.

Is there anything you wish other people knew about SCAN?

I wish more people knew just how much SCAN does for children and families in our community. A lot of folks hear "SCAN" or "CASA" and aren't quite sure what that is. However, once they understand them, they're amazed by the mission and impact.

SCAN provides a wide range of services that support families, strengthen communities, and help prevent child abuse. And CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocates) is one of the programs under SCAN. CASA volunteers are trained community members who advocate for children involved in the court system due to abuse or neglect. They make sure children's needs and voices don't get lost, and their involvement can change the entire course of a child's life.

I wish more people knew how approachable and supportive SCAN is, and how truly thorough the CASA training and guidance are. You don't need a special background to become a CASA volunteer, just compassion, commitment, and a desire to show up for children who need someone in their corner.

What has been the best experience with SCAN so far?

There have been two experiences that really stand out for me at SCAN. The first has been getting to know my colleagues. They are some of the hardest-working, most knowledgeable, compassionate, and passionate people I've ever met. Seeing how deeply they care about the children they serve was both a relief and a huge source of motivation when I first started. I learn from them every single day, and I'm inspired by the way they show up for both children and volunteers.

Volunteer retention can be a challenge because CASA work involves real emotions, but what has impressed me most is how supported our volunteers feel. The CASA team does an exceptional job of encouraging, guiding, and uplifting every advocate. They celebrate wins, help navigate tough moments, and make sure no volunteer ever feels alone in their work. Watching them empower volunteers has been incredibly encouraging and makes me hopeful about welcoming even more people into this role.

The second experience was a full-circle moment. I attended the most recent Community Resilience Block Party in my old neighborhood alongside Kanika and the parent I mentioned earlier — someone I had referred to SCAN years ago and who is now a SCAN ambassador. Being back in that space, seeing her growth, and reconnecting with familiar faces reminded me how interconnected this work truly is and how powerful long-term community relationships can be.

What are any challenges you have faced in your work with SCAN?

One of the biggest challenges has been simply spreading the word about the urgent need for CASA volunteers. Many people don't know what CASA is or realize how significant an advocate can be for a child navigating the court system. When I tell people that numerous children are currently waiting for a CASA volunteer, they're shocked and honestly, that's the challenge: Awareness. Once people understand the role, they're

usually moved by it. My job is to bridge that gap so more people see that this is work they *can* do and work that truly matters.

Do you have any goals or hopes for the next year with SCAN? Is there anything coming up/happening in your work that you are excited about or want to share?

My biggest hope for the next year is to significantly narrow the gap between the number of children on our waitlist and the number of available CASA volunteers. Even reducing the waitlist by a fraction would mean that dozens of children finally have someone in their corner. I'm excited about strengthening our outreach, trying new ways to reach potential volunteers, and connecting with parts of the community we haven't tapped into yet. Every volunteer we bring in is one more child who won't have to wait for support and that's what keeps me moving forward.

Are you involved with any other community organizations, hobbies, or activities?

Outside of work, I'm an avid reader and I'm currently on an Alice Feeney kick. I love thrillers, mysteries, and anything with a twist that keeps me guessing. I also have a deep love for music, especially live music. I'm going to an Indigo Girls concert next month, and over the years I've had the joy of seeing several of my favorite bands live, including The Cure, Duran Duran, and Tears for Fears. I collect vinyl records, and I listen to them almost every night on my refurbished 1980s speakers, which are absolutely one of my favorite things in my house.

I'm also involved with the RVA Death Collaborative, a community group focused on supporting people through grief and end-of-life transitions. The work centers on building community connections, reducing stigma, and helping people feel less alone during difficult moments. Being part of this group has been meaningful and has given me another way to support people in the community.

And on a lighter note, I love exploring Richmond's small business and restaurant scene. Honestly, is it bad to say that having Stella's Grocery right next door to the SCAN office is a perk I didn't know I needed?! Richmond has such great local spots, and I love supporting them.

What might someone be surprised to learn about you?

People are often surprised to learn that I've been with my husband since middle school. We actually bonded over music...he let me borrow his latest Cure cassette, and the rest is history.

Is there anything I didn't ask that you wish I had?

I'd just add that if you've ever wondered what you could do to make a real and lasting difference, becoming a CASA volunteer is one of the most powerful ways to do it. And if you're reading this and thinking, "Hmm... I wonder if I could do that?" ...the answer is probably yes! We'll train you, support you, and cheer you on the whole way.

And if it turns out CASA isn't quite the right fit for you, I bet you know someone who *would* be interested in learning more. Sharing the opportunity is just as impactful, especially when there are children waiting for an advocate.