

# Children's Center Current Highlights

Winter 2026



**Barbara Sinatra**  
CHILDREN'S CENTER

# Letter from Board President, Hal Gershowitz



Dear Friends of the Children's Center,

As a champion of the children served at the Barbara Sinatra Children's Center, you already know how important the Center is to the kids it serves. Traditionally, a victim of child abuse, whether it has been physical, sexual, or emotional abuse, has had few, if any, community resources available to ameliorate the burden such a horrific experience places on a child.

Since the Barbara Sinatra Children's Center opened its doors 40 years ago, over 23,000 children have been treated here. The Center now provides nearly 6,000 therapy sessions a year to children in the Coachella Valley and is now called upon to conduct over 400 forensic interviews every year.

To add insult to injury, the issue of child abuse is compounded by the reality that human trafficking of children is on the rise. Last year, we saw a startling increase in the number of children we treated who were victims of trafficking. Riverside County Child Protective Services referred over 100 trafficking victims to the Center, almost all of whom were young girls.

Without the professional help provided by an organization such as the Barbara Sinatra Children's Center, most kids who have suffered abuse live with the trauma of abuse for the rest of their lives, often becoming abusers themselves. We also know it doesn't have to be that way.

The availability of well-trained, skilled therapists such as those here at the Center makes all the difference in the world to the kids who have suffered physical, sexual, or emotional abuse. It is a simple reality—those kids who have access to well-trained, skilled therapists

do really well as they grow into adulthood. Those who do not have access to such care are often burdened with serious, lifelong issues.

The Barbara Sinatra Children's Center has also pioneered in the development of age-appropriate materials that are now used in a worldwide program to curtail the incidence of child abuse. The Center's animated and age-appropriate "Protect Yourself Rules" videos have now been viewed over 500 million times in communities through the world.

All of this has been made possible largely through the interest, concern, and generosity of good people who, for at least part of the year, call the Coachella Valley home. We're taking this opportunity to thank you for that.

Sincerely,

Harold Gershowitz, Board President

# Letter from Director/Executive Officer, John Thoresen

Dear Friends and Donors,

Each day, we are reminded of the many ways your generosity helps illuminate the lives of the young people we serve. Today, we'd like to share the story of one remarkable client whose progress would not be possible without you.

In mid-2025, a 17-year-old young woman came to our Center seeking help after experiencing significant harm within her home. Despite the emotional weight she carried, she took the courageous step of seeking support on her own. Like many of the youth we serve, she faced the challenges without access to medical insurance, and, in her case, with limited family involvement in her healing process.

From the moment she walked into the Center, we sensed her resilience and determination. She attends high school full-time, works part-time, and has followed every recommendation from her therapists. Over the past few months, she has engaged in individual therapy and psychiatric care at our Center and recently completed our *Believe in Yourself* self-esteem group, a program made possible by donors like you.

With your support, she found a safe space to be heard and discovered compassion, community, and tools to help her begin rebuilding a sense of confidence and self-worth.

I shared with some of you an excerpt from the letter she wrote reflecting what the experience meant to her. With her permission, we are honored to share her words with you.

Here is her letter:

Therapy was always something that I wish I could have but never thought was possible for me, especially for financial reasons. [Because of donor support, I was able] to attend Barbara Sinatra Children's Center [this] was a huge turning point in my life. For once I felt like my thoughts, feelings, and experiences are valid. Being a part of the self-esteem group was an experience I didn't know I needed. Through my good and bad days, I regularly came to the weekly Wednesday sessions [*Believe in Yourself*]. Even though I didn't know everyone's story and wasn't sure they could relate to mine, I found a sense of comfort knowing that there were kids like me there. It helped me feel less isolated and less alone. Learning about self-esteem and self-worth has helped me learn self-love and being celebrated. It helped me learn acceptance and to be comfortable with who I am inside and out. As I continue going to therapy, I hope to continue to grow, learn, and heal.

Her voice represents the impact you make when you invest in healing and hope, and we are deeply grateful for you. Thank you for supporting the Barbara Sinatra Children's Center, and the young people who rely on our care.

Warmest wishes,

John Thoresen, Director/Executive Officer

# Children's Holiday Party

While the holiday season is a time of joy for many, we know that for some children, it can be a difficult and lonely time. At the Barbara Sinatra Children's Center, we are committed to ensuring that every child in our care experiences the warmth and love they deserve, especially during this special time of year.

On the morning of Saturday, December 20, we hosted our annual Children's Holiday Party for the children we serve. Thanks to the generous donations of our supporters, each child received a bagful of toys or a gift card, bringing smiles to their faces. Families had the option to either drive through and receive their gifts or join us for the day's activities. For those who chose to stay, the morning was filled with arts and crafts, face painting, and plenty of goodies to enjoy.

The real stars of the event were Solo and Chewy, two adorable dogs from the Riverside County Sheriff's Department, who stole the show. Solo and Chewy are Electronic Scent Detection dogs, who are assigned to the Riverside County Child Exploitation Team Task Force. Children and their families were excited to meet the pups and pose for photos with the officers.

We are deeply grateful to everyone who helped make this holiday season brighter. Your kindness and generosity made this event truly special, and we couldn't have done it without you. From all of us at the Barbara Sinatra Children's Center, thank you for spreading joy and hope to those who need it most.

A special thank you to those who made the event possible:

**Riverside County Fire Department**

**Riverside County Sheriff's Department**

**Riverside County Detectives—Jason Pilanco and Joel Pabelico, and  
Riverside County Child Exploitation Team K9 members, Solo and Chewy**

**BSCC Volunteer Lydia Whitaker**

**Cake 4 Kids**



# Barbara Sinatra Children's Center Client Story

We send our children to school to receive an education from trusted adults. Educational staff undergo fingerprint and government background checks, have mandatory child abuse reporting laws, and receive specialized training to become an entrusted provider. Yet, even with a system in place to safeguard children, no system is perfect. Sometimes a perpetrator finds a way in and harms the very children that we all try so hard to protect. Such is the case of our young client, Jane.

Jane is a seven-year-old and was brought to the Barbara Sinatra Children's Center (BSCC) by her biological parents. Jane enjoys her dance and cheer class which takes place at the after-school program. She likes candy and learning about dinosaurs. Jane comes from a close-knit family who spend quality time together. One evening Jane's sister went to their mother and disclosed Jane had been trying to engage in inappropriate sexual behavior. Alarmed, the mother went to talk with Jane about her sister's statements. Fearing she was going to be in trouble, Jane tried to deny what she had done. Eventually, Jane told the truth and admitted her behavior.

The parents were distraught and beside themselves. The mother decided to ask Jane, "Where did you learn this?" Jane shared, "My teacher shows us how." Jane's mother immediately phoned the local police station and met with law enforcement. A forensic interview was conducted at BSCC. In the interview, additional information surfaced that raised concern that other children may have been abused by the same teacher. Jane was then referred to the BSCC Clinical Department.

Jane did not have insight that the abuse with the teacher was inappropriate or harmful. Jane thought the abuse was an activity with the teacher and a few classmates. The teacher had been trusted by all, including her own parents.

Jane's therapy at BSCC began with education about sexual abuse, symptoms, assuring increased supervision, and validating a safe home environment. Jane also received age-appropriate education about sexual abuse and the important intervention that what her teacher did was not her fault. Initially Jane did not believe or accept the abuse was wrong. She did not understand her friendly teacher who played games, spoke with all the parents, and gave candy also hurt her. This insight took time to achieve.

Jane was encouraged to create her own trauma narrative, a process that allows children to express themselves while learning to manage difficult emotions associated with the trauma. The grooming and her experience were expressed in a format of her choosing. Jane drew pictures to show where the abuse happened. Many abuse victims want to avoid the pain and shame associated with the abuse. Talking, picture making, and writing allow the child to approach the trauma in a safe manner which helps alleviate shame and hurt.

Jane and her mother also received conjoint therapy. Jane shared her narrative with her mother. Critical to this component is the promotion of positive healthy communication and sharing between the parent and child. Jane's mother was calm and supportive in hearing and talking about what happened to Jane. The actual sharing of the narrative helps to reduce hurt from keeping the abuse a secret. Sharing with a loved one also removes the experience of suffering in silence. Afterwards, Jane had a sense of pride for sharing what happened to her.

Jane was also enrolled in our Life Skills and Tennis Group, geared toward children her age. In this group topics like self-care, hygiene, communications skills, and sportsmanship were addressed. Additionally, Jane signed up for Art Camp for elementary school aged children. Jane worked collaboratively with clients her age on a group project to "rise above the story." Jane engaged in healthy activities such as jewelry making, and learned about different forms of art and textiles.

Through a course of treatment marked by patience and interventions tailored to Jane's specific needs, she began to heal. Evidence-based treatment alongside thoughtful individualized therapy helped her to let go and release shame. Over time, Jane no longer felt at fault for what had happened. Jane began to feel safe. This change could be seen in her ease at school "drop off" each morning, appropriate play and communication with peers and siblings, and a peaceful sleep throughout the night.

Jane's story is an important one. While she was a child fortunate to get help, it's also a reminder that harmful things can happen to children even when good, protective parents are present. When systems such as background checks fail, children need a place they can go to heal and recover from abuse. The Barbara Sinatra Children's Center provides this essential work quietly every day. Each child has the inherent right to feel peaceful and proud of themselves.

# BSCC Takes on Leadership Role<sup>!</sup> at International Conference

## Authentic Voices: Next Steps in Prevention

The Barbara Sinatra Children's Center, as a leading voice in prevention, was asked to highlight survivors' experiences through **Authentic Voices: Next Steps in Prevention**, a moving and thought-provoking panel discussion held in late January at the 41st International San Diego Conference on Child and Family Maltreatment in San Diego, California.

The conference brings together professionals dedicated to advancing best practices in the prevention, recognition, assessment, investigation, and treatment of child and family maltreatment.

The opening symposium stood out by placing survivors and family members who have written about their lived experience at the center of the conversation. BSCC abuse consultant Dr. Jon Conte served as the moderator of the symposium, which featured seven guest panelists. Subtitled **The Stories You Thought You Knew: Journeys That Will Move You**, the discussion invited panelists to listen, reflect, and reimagine prevention through their authentic voices.

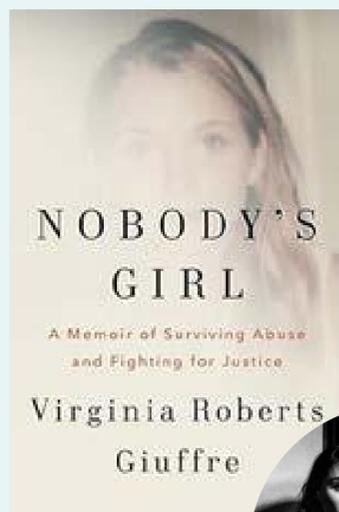
### Interconnected Themes

#### *Why Survivors Tell Their Stories*

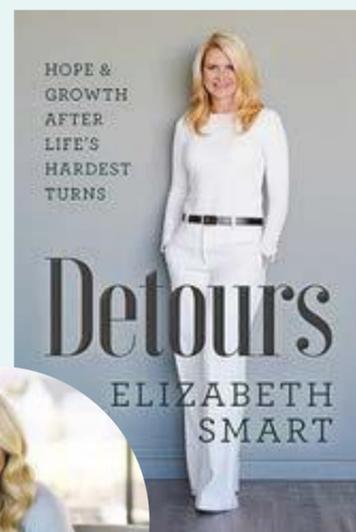
Panelists reflected on their reasons for writing, how the process affected their healing, and what they discovered about themselves along the way. They shared what they hoped readers would gain and described the impact and responses their books had received, highlighting the growing importance of survivor voices in public understanding and professional practice.



**Flip Rodriguez**  
American Ninja Warrior  
and Author of  
The Man Behind the Mask



**Amanda & Sky Roberts**  
Family of  
Virginia Roberts Giuffre  
Author of  
Nobody's Girl



**Elizabeth Smart**  
Author of  
Detours: Hope & Growth  
After Life's Hardest Turns

### ***Using Their Voices***

Panelists read samples from their books, bringing their stories directly to the audience. These moments grounded the discussion in lived experience, reminding those in attendance of the human realities beyond research, policy, and clinical work.

### ***From Awareness to Prevention and Action***

The final portion of the symposium focused on what comes next. Panelists explored how public awareness can translate into meaningful support for survivors, and how prevention strategies could address the diverse nature of trauma while recognizing shared impacts. They also reflected on the challenges that continue to stand in the way of preventing child sexual abuse.

The symposium concluded with book signings, offering attendees an opportunity to connect after the session.

**Authentic Voices: Next Steps in Prevention** reinforces the importance of creating spaces where survivor perspectives, professional expertise, and prevention-focused dialogue intersect. The Barbara Sinatra Children’s Center is proud to continue our role as a trusted and influential convener of critical conversations on the prevention of child abuse. This unprecedented collection of voices was captured on film, and will soon be available for all to experience.



**Click the play button to see a short video from the conference.  
Turn up the volume on your device if necessary.  
Click on the full screen icon [ ] to enlarge the video.**

# Introducing Champions for Children

## Formerly Aunts and Uncles Club New Name-Same Impact



Champions for Children is our annual giving community for those who believe every child deserves safety, healing, and the chance to thrive. Formerly known as the Aunts & Uncles Club, this refreshed name reflects the heart of our mission and the powerful role our supporters play. Champions for Children stand up for children by providing consistent, life-changing support that fuels therapy and essential services. Through annual donations of \$1,000, Champions for Children enrich the lives of young survivors through the care they receive. 100% of every membership donation goes directly to the children's programs and therapy with no administrative costs taken out.

# Research in Prevention: How Your Support is Shaping the Future of Child Abuse Education

As part of our *Passion to Prevent* capital campaign, we are expanding our commitment to child abuse prevention in a powerful new way. Thanks to the generous support of our donors, we are excited to introduce a groundbreaking initiative that will significantly strengthen our child abuse prevention efforts. At the core of this initiative is Dr. Misaki Natsuaki, a professor of psychology at the University of California, Riverside, who will lead the research, with advice from Dr. Jon Conte, a dedicated professional advisor on child sexual abuse and a leading scholar in the field.

Dr. Conte, who has been working with the Barbara Sinatra Children's Center for over a decade, was instrumental in developing the "Protect Yourself Rules" video series. This series, which can be found at [FightChildAbuse.org](https://www.fightchildabuse.org), teaches children how to recognize abuse, understand grooming behaviors, and know how to report concerns. It tackles subjects like unsafe touching, bullying, and internet safety with age-appropriate materials targeted toward children in kindergarten through high school.

Dr. Natsuaki will work in partnership with Dr. Conte to lead a comprehensive four-year project evaluating how communities are currently using these resources. Her research will assess the program's effectiveness, identify areas for improvement, and provide the foundation for expanding the program into a larger, multi-system prevention initiative that can reach even more children and communities across the country and internationally.

When asked what excites Dr. Natsuaki about the project, she said, “I’m excited about this child abuse prevention project because it turns science into action. Prevention is powerful—it not only stops harm but also lays the foundation for healthy development. As a developmental psychologist, I’ve spent my career studying children and families, especially those facing adversity. This project is a chance to give back—using knowledge to protect children and build safeguards for their future.”

Over the next five years, Dr. Natsuaki will oversee the long-term evaluation of the program’s impact, ensuring that the findings are evidence-based and actionable. These insights will allow us to refine our messaging, improve the program’s outcomes, and share our findings with schools, houses of worship, program partners, and leaders in the field of child protection.



This investment reflects our belief that preventing abuse requires not only compassion and care, but innovation, accountability, and a willingness to challenge the status quo. We are deeply grateful to our donors for making this research possible, and excited to see how this collaboration will drive lasting change in the fight to protect children.

Dr. Misaki N. Natsuaki is a developmental psychologist. She received her B.A. and M.A. in psychology from the International Christian University in Tokyo, Japan, and her Ph.D. in Human Development from the University of California, Davis. She held a postdoctoral position at the Institute of Child Development, University of Minnesota, Twin Cities.

**You are cordially invited to attend the**  
Barbara Sinatra Children's Center  
**2026 Champion Honors Luncheon**



**with 2026 Champion**  
***Nadia Murad***  
**Nobel Peace Prize Winner and**  
***TIME Magazine Woman of the Year***

**March 6, 2026 • 11:00 am Reception • 11:45 am Luncheon Doors Open**  
**JW Marriott Desert Springs Resort and Spa • Palm Desert, CA**

**Champion Sponsor: \$10,000.00**

Four (4) guests invited to an exclusive private-home reception with Nadia Murad, the evening of March 5; one reserved table for ten (10) at the Champion Luncheon; ten (10) guests invited to the pre-luncheon meet and greet with Nadia Murad; on-screen recognition during the event; verbal recognition from stage in the welcome address; recognition on event collateral and materials

**Event Sponsor: \$5,000.00**

One reserved table for ten (10) at the Champion Luncheon, ten (10) guests invited to the pre-luncheon meet and greet with Nadia Murad, on-screen recognition during the event, recognition on event collateral and materials

**Table Sponsor: \$1,750.00**

One reserved table for ten (10) at the Champion Luncheon

**Individual Ticket: \$175.00**

**Please contact Laura Rogers at 760-773-1636 or [LRogers@eisenhowerhealth.org](mailto:LRogers@eisenhowerhealth.org) for more information**

Nadia Murad is a Nobel Peace Prize-winning human rights advocate and survivor of unimaginable violence. During the Yazidi genocide by ISIS, she was abducted from her hometown of Kocho in Iraq. Much of her community was massacred. After losing most of her family, Murad was held as an Islamic State sex slave for three months, alongside thousands of other Yazidi women and girls. Nadia escaped her captors and went on to make the courageous decision to speak out, not only for herself but for countless women and children whose voices have been silenced by sexual and physical abuse. Her advocacy has been recognized around the world, including being named one of *TIME Magazine's* Women of the Year, serving as a United Nations Goodwill Ambassador for the Dignity of Survivors of Human Trafficking, and receiving the 2018 Nobel Peace Prize for her efforts to end sexual violence and uphold the dignity of survivors. Nadia's story is a powerful testament to resilience, healing, and the urgent responsibility we share to protect and uplift vulnerable children, a mission that lies at the heart of the work we do every day at the Barbara Sinatra Children's Center.

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