

OUR MISSION IS TO PROVIDE DIVERSE SERVICES THAT INSPIRE PEOPLE TO IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF THEIR LIVES IN THEIR GREATEST TIME OF NEED .

## FROM THE DESK OF THE CEO:

Dear Friends,

It is my pleasure to share Guardian Angel's 2024 Newsletter, as we reflect on a wonderful year of service and celebration. Our phenomenal staff reached 97,801 people, 17,275 through direct services, across seven programs, and 80,526 via prevention education and community outreach. All of our essential services were implemented 24-hours daily, seven days a week. We provided 11,971 nights of emergency shelter and 35,913 meals to adults and children fleeing the horrors of domestic violence. Additionally, 5,000 emergency hotline calls were fielded out of our 24-hour emergency shelter. We advanced our mission to provide diverse services that inspire people to improve the quality of their lives in their greatest time of need. Guardian Angel Community Services commemorated the milestone anniversary of 40 years for our Groundwork Domestic Violence Program, celebrated accomplishments and gathered for many memorable awareness events and fundraisers. We were so proud to achieve re-accreditation through the Council on Accreditation for which we prepared for a year and a half. We hope you enjoy reading about the exciting achievements of the last year. On behalf of our Board of Directors, staff, volunteers, and everyone at Guardian Angel Community Services, thank you for your support of our mission.



Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Ines Kutlesa".

Ines Kutlesa, MA. LCPC. LPHA. CCTP  
Chief Executive Officer



## In Loving Memory of Jack Daly



It is with heavy hearts that we share that dear friend of Guardian Angel Community Services, Jack Daly, passed away on July 6, 2024. Jack served on our Board of Directors for over 20 years and was on the Exchange Club of Joliet for many years as well. Jack loved participating in agency-wide program reviews and serving on the Board of Directors' Program Committee. He particularly enjoyed talking to clients during the program review interviews and was always in sheer awe of what GACS staff does for humanity.... each and every day. He had a close connection with our Exchange Club Center too, since he was a part of the exchange club that founded our center years ago.

Both Jack, and his wife Lynn, who was a nurse at Silver Cross Hospital for 30 years before she retired, had such love for our agency and he was very proud to be a part of our Guardian Angel family. Chief Executive Officer, Ines Kutlesa remembers long ago when Jack invited her to the radio station for the first time, that he was managing for many years in Grundy County. He always had airtime for Guardian Angel and...it seems like that was just yesterday. He will be greatly missed by so many. Jack's legacy will live on in the work that he supported so diligently at Guardian Angel Community Services, as so many memorial donations were made in loving memory of Jack Daly.

# 16th Annual Angelica: Dancing With Our Local Stars Gala

GACS' celebrated the 16th annual Angelica: Dancing With Our Local Stars Gala & Fundraiser on April 6, 2024 at Bobak's Signature Events (Woodridge) welcoming more than 550 guests in attendance. "Angelica" is the annual event and fundraiser benefitting all of Guardian Angel's programs. The event is highlighted by a dance competition for which local "stars" prepare a dance routine with a professional to perform at the event. We were thrilled to have returning event emcee Pete Colarelli (Exxon Mobil, Midwest Government Affairs Manager) lead us through a night of excitement and raising awareness of our mission to provide diverse services that inspire people to improve the quality of their lives in their greatest time of need. Guest speaker, Phillip Wojtasik accompanied by his sister, Marissa Mackowiak, shared their tragic story of losing their sister, Christine, to domestic violence 27 years ago. Phil's heartfelt speech concluded with his intentions to help keep Christine's memory alive through supporting the work of Guardian Angel and his belief that "I wish our dear Christine would have learned about an organization such as Guardian Angel Community Services, and she may still be with us today." Our local star dancers rose above and beyond the challenge and delivered unforgettable performances. Captivating the night were: Sylvia Acosta Chavez (Spanish Community Center), Angie Aegerter (Fit Foundation), Joanne Bartelsen (RE/MAX 10), DeAndre Cooley (ExxonMobil), Rob Kennedy (Sunrise Technologies), Kristen Kronland (Hollywood Casino Joliet), Michelle Wennlund (Hair Stylist) and Tommy Zoretic (Roc City Bar & Grill). Concluding each dance routine, a panel of local star judges provided their "expert" commentary. 2024 judges included Dr. Ernie Tan, semi-retired urologist and a veteran judge for this event, Michele Vana who was the second-place winner in 2023, and Jeff Allen, retired Will County Judge. DeAndre Cooley of ExxonMobil took home the mirror ball trophy along with his partner, Athanasia Spartharkis of Fred Astaire Dance in Mokena. The agency honored top donors and supporters, 2024 Award Recipients included: Rush Intermodal, Inc. – Corporate Donor of the Year; Char Kocik – Private Donor of the Year; and Donna Plier and husband Greg Tomala – Guardian Angel of the Year and Volunteer of the Year respectively. Angelica 2024 was certainly a year to remember, and we are forever grateful to the many supporters and donors who make this event more and more memorable and fantastic, year after year.



2024 Local Star Dancers and Dance Professionals strike a pose before the competition begins



GACS Staff gather for a group shot at the end of a successful evening of fundraising

## Holiday Giving: Angels on Assignment

The 2023 holiday season was filled with so much joy this year at Guardian Angel, thanks to the generosity of so many! Throughout the month of December we received in-kind donations of wish list items, Christmas presents, and gift cards from more than 50 community groups, organizations and individuals! We were overwhelmed by the incredible spirit of giving. Pictured here are just a few examples of the many donations received during the holiday season. We are grateful to all of our donors for taking the time to shop and deliver the wonderful gifts and supplies. We are also thankful to our dedicated volunteer, Michele Vana, who helped take in these gifts, sort and organize them for distribution, making it so joyful for our clients and their families.



Chief Development Officer, Jane Ukleja and Senior Development Specialist, Val Muersch accepting donations in December 2023



# Recap of October: Domestic Violence Awareness Month



GACS staff volunteering as the "Gatekeepers" at Witches Night Out 2023

Every year during October: Domestic Violence Awareness Month (DVAM), GACS participates in many awareness events and activities. October 2023 was an extra special year as our Groundwork Program celebrated it's 40th Anniversary. We had a successful awareness month, hosting and participating in a variety of events including: Will County Take Back the Night, Grundy County Take Back the Night, Witches Night Out, and our Angels Against Abuse 5K.

This past fall, we kicked off the month of October with the 24th annual Will County Take Back the Night (TBTN) event, October 5, 2023 at Hufford Junior High School. The event was free to the public and included resource tables, a vigil honoring lives lost to domestic violence in Will county, and a march in the surrounding area. Annually, TBTN brings survivors, supporters, activists and community leaders together in a call to end violence. The 2023 event featured speaker Nikki Merriman, a local survivor, author, advocate and public speaker. Nikki shared her story of survival and highlighted important topics including sexual assault and teen dating violence. For more information on the annual Will County Take Back the Night event, visit [www.willtbtn.com](http://www.willtbtn.com)

Grundy County Take Back the Night (TBTN) was hosted on October 17, 2023 in Morris, Illinois where the agency operates a satellite office. Grundy TBTN is a free event, organized by our Groundwork Program and held annually at the Grundy County Court House. This year's event included keynote speaker, Jessica Schomer, in association with the Morris Women's Club. The event concluded with a special anniversary walk to the Grundy County Historical Museum in celebration of it's 100th Anniversary, the 127th Anniversary of the I & M Canal and the 40th Anniversary of the Groundwork Program. Grundy TBTN would not be possible without assistance provided by the Morris Women's Club throughout the years.

Witches Night Out is a costume fundraiser for women who want to make a difference in another woman's life. Proceeds go to Will County Agencies serving women and children. The agencies selected provide services and support that help women secure their independence, regain their dignity, and become self-sufficient ([www.witchesnightout.com](http://www.witchesnightout.com)). The event is held annually at the Jacob Henry Mansion (Joliet) and has continued to grow in popularity, year after year, with tickets selling out in record time. Additionally, Guardian Angel staff serve on the committee and volunteer every year as the "gatekeepers" and scan thousands of tickets for attendees, as they arrive. GACS was so thankful to, again, have been selected as a recipient of proceeds from the 2024 event.

The 13th Annual Angels Against Abuse 5K Walk & Run was held on October 21, 2023. The event was the perfect way to conclude the month of October and to commemorate the 40th Anniversary of the Groundwork Domestic Violence Program. A keynote speech highlighting the program's achievements was given by GACS Chief Executive Officer, Ines Kutlesa and remarks commending the program were given by Illinois State Senator Meg Loughran Cappel. Employees of long-time agency supporters, Chicago Tube and Iron attended the event in large numbers including Chairman and CEO Dr. Donald McNeeley and his family. Additional funds were raised through raffle baskets, ticket sales, and generous donations from our community supporters. GACS is eternally grateful to all of those who show their support to the agency, especially by attending or otherwise supporting our awareness events. For more information on the programs benefiting from DVAM event proceeds, visit our webpage: [www.gacsprograms.org](http://www.gacsprograms.org)



GACS Staff gather for a group photo at the conclusion of the Angels Against Abuse 5K

# Sexual Assault Service Center Honored with De La Salle Medallion for Excellence

Guardian Angel Community Services & our Sexual Assault Services Center (SASC) were honored to be presented with the De La Salle Medallion for Excellence in Community Partnership at Lewis University on May 15, 2024. This award celebrates a community-based organization which has demonstrated outstanding collaboration with Lewis University through curricular and co-curricular community engagement. We are so proud of our exceptional advocates, counselors, prevention educators, leaders and entire SASC Team and so grateful to Lewis University for this prestigious honor!



The SASC Team with CEO, Ines Kutlesa at the Lewis University Award Presentation

## Recap of April: Sexual Assault Awareness Month



Saul Good Trio performs at "Songs for Survivors" on April 12

April, recognized nationally as Sexual Assault Awareness Month (SAAM), was highlighted by many exciting awareness events and activities hosted by our Sexual Assault Service Center (SASC). 2024 was a year to remember! A music-themed event, "Songs for Survivors" was held on April 12, 2024 at Pelican Harry's Bar & Grill in Homer Glen. The event featured music by the talented Saul Good Trio, who generously donated their time to perform at the event. DJ Karisma donated his time, as well, for the second half of the event. Funds were raised through a split the pot and raffle benefitting survivors of sexual assault.

April 18, 2024. The event featured a rally, an and Spanish, raffles and awareness activities followed by attendees participating in a mile-long march to bring attention to sexual assault & gender-based violence. Representatives from the Office of United States Congresswoman Lauren Underwood attended the event and publicly spoke to share their support for the program and agency.

The annual "Walk a Mile" awareness event was held at the Joliet Public Library, downtown location, on an educational presentation given by staff in both English

The month of awareness activities concluded with Denim Day, celebrated on April 24, 2024. For the past 25 years, Peace Over Violence has run its Denim Day campaign on a Wednesday in April in honor of Sexual Violence Awareness Month. The campaign was originally triggered by a ruling by the Italian Supreme Court where a rape conviction was overturned because the justices felt that since the victim was wearing tight jeans she must have helped her rapist remove her jeans, thereby implying consent ([peaceoverviolence.org](http://peaceoverviolence.org)). On this day, allies of the cause are encouraged to wear denim to show their support. More information on the annual awareness events and Sexual Assault Awareness Month can be found at [gacsprograms.org/saam](http://gacsprograms.org/saam).



Walk a Mile attendees gather for a group photo before beginning the mile-long march in Downtown Joliet

# Chief Executive Officer, Ines Kutlesa Representing GACS Locally and Nationwide



Ines Kutlesa was invited by Congresswoman Lauren Underwood to the Naturalization Ceremony in April

Ines Kutlesa, CEO was honored to continue to represent Guardian Angel Community Services locally, throughout the State of Illinois, and nationwide in her existing and new positions this year, serving on United States Congresswoman Lauren Underwood's East Regional Advisory Council, and on Governor Pritzker's Domestic Violence Regional Fatality Review Committee. She continues to serve on the Illinois Council on Women and Girls, and as Chair of the State Councils Gender Based Violence Committee, a position to which she was elected in 2019. To advance the status of women and girls across the State of Illinois, as a Council Appointee, she serves alongside Illinois Department of Human Services: Bureau of Refugee and Immigrant Services, Illinois Department on Aging, Illinois Department of Human Rights, Illinois Department of Child and Family Services, Illinois Department of Healthcare and Family Services, Illinois Department of Public Health, Illinois Department of Labor, Illinois State Board of Education, Illinois Board of Higher Education, and Illinois Community College Board. This year she co-hosted the 2nd Know Your Rights event with Lieutenant Governor Juliana Stratton during Women's History Month.

## Save the Date

THE ANNUAL GALA BENEFITTING GUARDIAN ANGEL'S PROGRAMS

# ANGELICA

*dancing with our local stars*

## SATURDAY APRIL 5, 2025

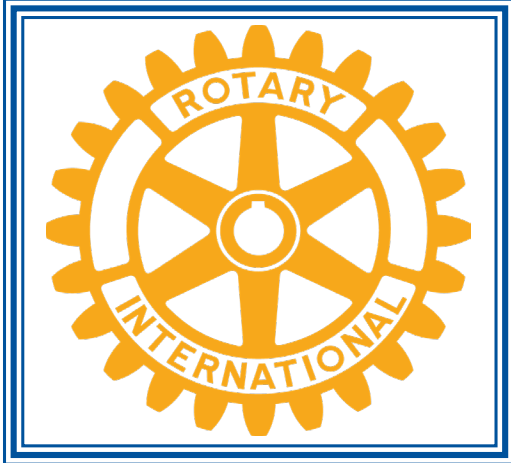
BOBAK'S SIGNATURE EVENTS | WOODRIDGE, IL



[WWW.GACSPROGRAMS.ORG/ANGELICA](http://WWW.GACSPROGRAMS.ORG/ANGELICA)

# BOARD OF DIRECTORS RECOGNITION

## Larry Wiers Honored With Silver Eagle Award



Congratulations to our very own Board Director, Larry Wiers on receiving the Silver Eagle Award recognized by the Rotary Club of Joliet. The Rotary Club of Joliet's Silver Eagle Award was created to recognize seniors 65-years-old and older for committed volunteer service and for "going beyond the call of duty" in that role, which Larry most certainly does on our Board of Directors and as he has in our community for decades.

### BOARD OF DIRECTORS

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MAIN OFFICE:  
168 N. OTTAWA ST.  
JOLIET, IL 60432

PHONE:  
815-729-0930

FAX:  
815-744-6087

GRUNDY COUNTY  
SATELLITE OFFICE:  
GROUNDWORK  
815-941-2261

Domestic violence and sexual assault services available at Crete, Planfield, and Morris Satellite Offices. Please call 815-729-0930.

CONNECT:



[www.gacsprograms.org](http://www.gacsprograms.org)



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## GACS' CORE PROGRAMS:



EXCHANGE CLUB CENTER  
Parenting classes for the prevention of child abuse & neglect

FOSTER CARE  
Nurturing and safe homes for children, foster home licensing & support services



GROUNDWORK DOMESTIC VIOLENCE PROGRAM  
Comprehensive services for individuals & families impacted by domestic violence

PARTNER ABUSE INTERVENTION PROGRAM  
Support & education for the development of healthy relationships



SEXUAL ASSAULT SERVICE CENTER  
Sexual assault & rape crisis services, prevention education and outreach

SUZY'S CARING PLACE  
Transitional housing & support services for survivors of domestic violence



24-Hr. HOTLINES:  
DOMESTIC VIOLENCE  
815-729-1228

SEXUAL ASSAULT  
815-730-8984