Maryland

Partners in Policymaking®

2023

Congratulations to the Partners in Policymaking® 2023 Graduating Class!

Our 2023 Partners in Policymaking® class met together from October 2022-August 2023. Over 12 sessions, and through a mixture of in-person and virtual settings, we covered many topics important to people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD), and their families. The Partners in Policymaking® program teaches individuals with IDD, and their family members, leadership skills and the process of developing positive partnerships with elected officials and other legislative officials on issues that impact the lives of those who have IDD. This program provides the tools and resources to people with IDD and family members need to become effective change-makers on local, state, or national and international levels.

Partners in Policymaking® alumni members can be found throughout the state. They are involved in work on commissions, serve on boards and workgroups, are members of coalitions that work for change, are active in advocacy during the Maryland legislative session, and are responsible for many of the positive changes we have seen over the years in our schools, workplaces, and community at large.

As you read through this yearbook, remember the names and stories of the graduating members of the 2023 Partners class. We are excited to see how they will use their drive, passion, and the skills gained through their active participation in Partners in Policymaking® to be positive agents of change. Over the past year, we've learned as much from each one of the Partners participants as we have from our nationally recognized guest speakers. Seeing their values, passion, creativity, and advocacy come to fruition in their capstone projects gives us continued hope for the future of Marylanders with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

To our Partners… Congratulations on your hard work and dedication, and thank you for your commitment to lifelong advocacy! Together, we represent a united and strong network with a clear mission. Welcome to the movement to ensure people with IDD and their families have the support and resources they need, to live, learn, work, and play in the communities they chose.

Sincerely,

Ande Kolp
Executive Director
The Arc Maryland

The Arc.
Maryland

ABOUT THE PROGRAM

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The Arc Maryland, with the Maryland Developmental Disabilities Council and People On the Go Maryland, are excited to acknowledge the 2023 graduating class of Maryland Partners in Policymaking® (Partners). Partners is a program that prepares adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD), parents, and family members of children and adults with IDD to be effective advocates at the local, state, and federal levels.

Partners in Policymaking® was created in 1987 by the Minnesota Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities upon their discovery that there was a need for a formal training process, covering best practices in advocacy on a variety of issues for people with IDD.

Partners in Policymaking® has been offered nationally and internationally since that time, resulting in more than 30,000 graduates worldwide. The Arc Maryland has offered the Partners in Policymaking® program in Maryland since 1996 with incredible financial and technical support from the Maryland Developmental Disabilities Council, and in-kind support from People On the Go Maryland.

Our organizations share a common goal of supporting adults with IDD and family members to be informed, enriched, educated, and empowered to be their very best, as active and contributing advocates. As of today, 446 self-advocates and family members have graduated from the Partners in Policymaking® program in Maryland; a legacy of which we are proud.

To learn more about the national Partners program on the Minnesota Department of Administration Council on Developmental Disabilities website, visit **www.MN.gov/MNDDC/PIPM/**. To learn more about the Maryland Partners in Policymaking® program, go to **www.TheArcMD.org/Partners/**.

The Arc Maryland

Maryland Developmental Disabilities Council
CREATING CHANGE • IMPROVING LIVES

People On the Go Maryland

THIS YEAR IN PARTNERS

During the Partners program, participants hear from expert speakers in many fields, including disability activists, community leaders, and local, state, and federal government officials whose work impacts the lives of people with disabilities. Partners class members form deep connections and friendships with their fellow classmates, develop working relationships with established advocates and policymakers, and often become lifelong agents of change in their communities.

This year's Partners sessions highlighted:

The History of Disability Advocacy

Developing Your Ideal Life

State Laws and Policy and Those Who Create Them

Inclusive Education & Lifelong Learning,

Assistive Technology & Media Skills

Behavior as Communication

Developmental Disabilities Day at the Legislature

Federal Laws & Advocacy in Action

Living Your Ideal Life

The Arc Maryland's Annual State Convention

A Home of Your Own

Taking Your Place & Graduation

27 Marylanders successfully completed the series and join the distinctive ranks Partners alumni. This will not be the last time you see their names or hear about their ongoing work on behalf of people with disabilities and their families!

The 2023 Partners were tasked with creating Capstone Projects to enhance their skills as change agents. Class members were asked to identify issues within their local communities and craft plans of action for positive change.

KIM RENÉE ALLEN

> ***The real test is not whether you avoid this failure, because you won't. It's whether you let it harden or shame you into inaction, or whether you learn from it; whether you choose to persevere.***
>
> ***- Barack Obama***

Kim Allen is a native Washingtonian who grew up in both the District of Columbia and Prince George's County, Maryland. She attended college and has worked much of her time in the DMV. Kim has experienced many successes and difficulties. She is a three-time cancer survivor, lives with multiple disabilities, and also has a son with challenges.

Because of her life experiences, Kim has changed her career focus and developed her skills to become an advocate and public speaker. Kim has worked with nonprofits; local, state, and federal government; and grassroots organizations. Her miracle child was born eleven weeks early. He required intensive medical services, educational accommodations, and community support. She noticed that many providers lacked the knowledge and sensitivity to meet her child's needs or interact with her respectfully. Kim was greatly concerned with their constant push to place her son in the most restrictive school settings, spurning Kim's quest to obtain the medical, education, and environments to support her son's development and inclusion. These experiences drive her to advocate and inspire her fire within.

For her Capstone project, Kim plans to use her skills, knowledge, and education to continue her advocacy for the lives of people marginalized, ignored, and disenfranchised in the community. She enjoys being involved in local government and participating in state and federal government planning and implementation. Her five-year plan includes successfully developing a nonprofit to assist transitioning youth, living with asperger syndrome, to successfully pursue their dreams and goals. She will continue to participate on Boards and committees as a voice of inclusion and guide for those with special needs and challenges.

KIRPAL J. ALLEN

> ***You will face many defeats in life, but never let yourself be defeated.***
>
> ***- Maya Angelou***

Kirpal was born in Washington, D.C., but grew up in Montgomery County. He lives with asperger syndrome, which is on the autism spectrum. After being diagnosed, most doctors and specialists never believed Kirpal would complete high school, but he went on to graduate from John F. Kennedy High School in 2021, making him a successful pandemic graduate! Kirpal is a dedicated student, swimmer, and a railfan (train enthusiast) who enjoys researching various historical topics.

Throughout his life, Kirpal has overcome numerous obstacles. He was born prematurely at 29 weeks, weighing almost three and a half pounds. With the love and support of his parents, friends, families, and professionals, Kirpal is living his best life! He constantly seeks ways to advocate for himself and others. He is also a member of the Independence Now Maryland Youth Leadership Forum. Last fall, Kirpal enrolled in Montgomery College General Studies STEM program and joined the Boys 2 Men Program, which supports African American and Latino students to navigate higher education. He also plans to join Montgomery College's MC LEADS program. Kirpal has participated in speech therapy, occupational therapy, supportive educational programs, and community-based services. His mother is a strong advocate and instilled the same in him. Kirpal truly embodies the meaning of his name - *kind and honorable man*.

For his Capstone project, Kirpal will continue to learn advocacy skills and participate actively in the community to remove stigma and increase inclusiveness for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Kirpal also plans to be an ambassador for the Partners in Policymaking® program to assist with recruitment efforts of self-advocates.

PAULA ARMSTRONG

> *Abled does not mean enabled. Disabled does not mean less abled.*
>
> *– Khang Kijarro Nguyen*

Paula Armstrong was born and raised in the District of Columbia. She has a twin brother and two other siblings, an older sister and a younger brother. She graduated from Eastern High School at the top 10% of her class. Paula married in May 1999 and divorced in October 2007, but from that union, her son, Jeremy, and her daughter, Morgan, were born. Her daughter Morgan has special needs.

Jeremy, 23, is a Towson University alumnus with a degree in Criminal Justice. Morgan, 18, is the "superstar" of the house and attends Kennedy Krieger Institute in Baltimore County. After being a single mom for 14 years, Paula married the man of her dreams in June 2021. They reside together in Waldorf, MD.

Paula was raised in the church, and her grandmother was a great example of a Godly woman. Paula attended Sunday School every Sunday and was taught the Bible. This had a major impact on the way she lives and the way she raised her children. Her family are members of the Greater Morning Star Apostolic church in Largo, MD. Paula has worked in the federal government for 33 years; she currently serves as the Deputy Director of Operations for the Office of Intramural Research at the National Institutes of Health in Rockville, MD.

Anyone familiar with Paula's story knows that she has been fighting for her daughter for years for everything. She secured a lawyer to fight the school system to get her daughter in a school that could properly educate her. Paula stood up to the doctors who wanted to dismiss her when she questioned their desire to put her daughter on medication that would have major side effects. She has put pen to paper on numerous occasions when her daughter was denied basic human rights.

In 2022, Paula created a nonprofit organization called AdvocaSAY, which has been the focus of her Capstone project. AdvocaSAY provides parents with information and resources that could be beneficial to their loved ones with disabilities. AdvocaSAY also has a weekly broadcast and plans to open an activity center for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

SCAN ME

MARÍA GUADALUPE NAVARRO BALTODANO

> *It's not easy, but it's not impossible, keep trying.*
>
> *– Unknown*

María Guadalupe Navarro Baltodano was born in Costa Rica, and has lived in Maryland since 2011. She has worked full-time for 14 years as an administrative assistant at the Embassy of Costa Rica in its Consular section.

María Guadalupe is a single mother of two wonderful children, Aurora, 1, and Joel Andrés, 8, who has Down syndrome and autism. Joel Andrés came into her life to teach her that you never have to give up. Born from a 24-week pregnancy, micro, premature, and weighing only 12 ounces, Joel Andrés lived almost 100 days in the NICU to finally be confirmed, during his hospital stay, of his condition of Down syndrome. In 2022, he was diagnosed with autism.

Since the birth of Joel Andrés, María Guadalupe has not stopped looking for the best for him. She has spent countless hours searching for therapies, and stimulation, and fighting for his inclusion in the neighborhood school and community so he would not be segregated into a group of children with special needs. This has motivated María Guadalupe to learn and seek all the necessary resources so her son can live a normal life. It has not been easy, as she has found hurdles along the way that discouraged her, but did not defeat her. María Guadalupe is here to fight for her son’s rights and happiness; hoping one day he can do it himself. Having Joel Andrés has allowed her to develop patience and a passion to help people and guide them, as it can be challenging as a parent.

Being part of Partners in Policymaking® has inspired María Guadalupe with her Capstone project. She has been able to provide help and guidance to Hispanic families who need support, and assist them in finding resources in the county for their children. Some Hispanic families do not know where to start because they only speak Spanish; they feel overwhelmed to continue with the necessary steps. For example, sometimes they let go of all the benefits that they can obtain for their children because of fears of their own immigration status. They are scared to request help for their children who are U.S. citizens. This is why, regardless of your child's condition, any Hispanic family member will be able to find support from María Guadalupe with the corresponding information to search for, and apply to, all the aid that the county has to offer for their children.

CATHY M. COPE

> ***The most beautiful people I’ve known are those who have known trials, have known struggles, have known loss, and have found their way out of the depths.***
>
> ***– Elizabeth Kübler-Ross***

Cathy Cope is a native Marylander who has lived in Howard County for the past 30 years. She is honored to be part of Maryland's 2023 Partners in Policymaking® class.

Cathy is the mother of a 38-year-old son, Daniel, who is thriving in the community! Dan has autism, and is supported by The Arc of Howard County. He experienced many challenges during his school years and required many special services. The path was long and difficult, but today Dan experiences a fulfilling life and has many interests and activities.

Cathy retired from the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, where she worked in Medicaid disability policy, advocacy, and systems improvements. She worked on many home and community-based waiver programs, serving a wide variety of states and stakeholders. She also worked on key, large Federal grant programs that were designed to improve disability and long-term care systems and programs. Cathy also served as a Technical Director for the outreach and enrollment of children into the Medicaid and Children's Health Insurance Programs. She has worked with many state governments, hospitals, educational systems and non-profit organizations in her federal role.

Before coming to the Federal government, Cathy served as a licensed clinical social worker in pediatric oncology, specializing in working with children with malignant brain tumors or undergoing bone marrow transplants, and in psychiatry at The Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore.

Cathy’s Capstone project focuses on non-profit boards – enhancing their missions and increasing their effectiveness. Specifically, she is analyzing what makes the best board composition, how to best select board members, how to address challenges, and how to seize opportunities that serve to improve the organization.

MINDY CORNETT-SHIFFLETT

> ***We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented.***
>
> ***- Elie Wiesel***

Mindy is the mother of two daughters, an advocate, co-founder of People On The Go Southern Maryland, and an employee of The Arc Southern Maryland. Growing up alongside a younger sibling with a disability taught Mindy at an early age that advocating is a necessity! Watching her family navigate the school systems and then adult services, is where she knew that she needed to continue to be a voice along with her family.

As an adult, Mindy pursued a career that allowed her to assist individuals with IDD and have their voices heard. As an employee of The Arc Southern Maryland, she has spent years working alongside individuals with IDD, where she has helped them live, learn, grow, and thrive in their communities. As a co-facilitator of the self-advocacy group, Empowering Partners - People On The Go Southern Maryland, she has the privilege of assisting individuals to learn about advocacy, and watching them shine! Mindy believes every person has a voice that deserves to be heard. There is still advocacy work to be done, and she is grateful to her fellow Partners and advocates to continue the journey.

Mindy's Capstone project is to continue to co-facilitate the People On The Go Southern Maryland Group, as well as assist a self-advocate in creating a self-advocacy group for students in high school who are transitioning into adult services. This group would meet quarterly.

SCAN ME

MONIQUE DUELL

> ***Where there's a woman, there's a miracle.***
>
> ***- Unknown***

Monique Duell is the mother of two sons, an advocate, international speaker, author, and host of the "Having a Moment With Moni" podcast and radio show. Monique is the founder of This Ability, LLC, which provides advocacy, education, support, and resources for individuals with special needs and their families in Prince George's County. She is the author of *Caregiver CPR, Grief is a Gangster, Jeremiah the Jackrabbit, Handicapped Mom: Lessons I Learned Through Cerebral Palsy,* and *How Do I Handle a Special Needs Child?* She is also the co-author of *The Power of God Daily Devotional II* and *50 Shades of Pink: A Healing Journey to Self-Love.*

Monique was featured on the PIC TV Network, which streams on Roku TV. Monique has been interviewed and featured on several platforms internationally and locally, from Nigeria to the UK. She has been featured in several magazines, including Stellar Woman Magazine, Faith Heart Magazine, and Legacy in the Making Magazine. Monique has also received numerous awards, including the 2023 Black Girlz Rock 'Shero' Award, 2022 PIC TV Network Community Heroes Award, SISTERS Award for Encouragement, and the Grace Girl Award in the "She Overcomes" category for her perseverance in overcoming extreme hardships.

Monique's riveting show, "Having a Moment with Moni" gives us a raw, transparent, and intimate look into her life as she navigates life as a special needs parent and caregiver for her youngest son, Jeremiah; an adult with cerebral palsy. The show airs every Friday at 10 EST on Hod Radio Network from Benin, Nigeria. The podcast streams weekly on all major platforms, including Apple Podcasts, iHeart Radio, and Spotify.

For her Capstone project, Monique has introduced a parenting app called, H.U.G.S., which stands for Help, Understanding, Generosity, and Salvation. H.U.G.S. is a safe space where special needs parents and caregivers can find help and hope while we are on this unpredictable journey. On H.U.G.S., users can interact with other parents and caregivers through live chat, a prayer board, blogs, and social media pages.

On the app, Monique plans to host monthly meetings, offer prayer and daily inspiration, and coordinate in-person gatherings. Families will be able to unwind, vent, cry, and seek God for strength for the journey. Another feature of H.U.G.S. is the "HUG" button, which sends a digital "hug" via text or email with words of encouragement. Monique wanted to create something for parents and caregivers to fill the void of emotional and spiritual support in the unique community. She aims to help those experiencing caregiver burnout. To check out "Having a Moment with Moni" on Spotify, scan the QR code here.

SCAN ME

DENISE R. EBLEN

Do what you can, with what you've got, where you are.

– Theodore Roosevelt

Denise was born and raised in Ireland and moved to the United States in 1999. Though her Irish family is still back in Ireland, she now lives in Howard County with her American family, including her husband, Shawn, and their kids, Rory and Darcy.

Rory was born in 2004, a happy, bouncy boy. As he grew into an adorable toddler, he missed some milestones, and was eventually diagnosed with autism in 2008 at four years old; just a few weeks before his sister Darcy was born. Rory attended local public schools and was fortunate to have truly wonderful and caring teachers to help and guide him. At the end of fifth grade, Rory moved from diploma bound to a certificate track. He has since graduated and is excited to join Community Connections at Howard County Community College for the 2023-2024 school year, where he will continue to learn job skills and work towards gaining his independence and living his best life! You can meet Rory on his YouTube channel – TheSuperRorio Eblen.

Denise has worked for the federal government for over twenty years. She is excited to combine her roles as a parent advocate and federal government executive in the development of a program that offers an avenue for federal employment for those without a diploma.

Civil service jobs offer great security, pay, and health benefits. Under Schedule A hiring authority, qualified people with disabilities can be non-competitively hired. However, the federal government is below their target of a workforce who identify as disabled. Most positions require a high school diploma, often excluding those with developmental or cognitive disabilities. However, GS-1 entry-level positions do not require a diploma.

Denise's Capstone project aims to create a pathway to federal government service for young adults with IDD. She is working with key personnel at her federal agency to develop a hiring strategy for part-time supply technicians in government laboratories. She will partner with high schools in three laboratory locations across the United States and take recommendations from case managers to identify candidates. After their initial time on the job, the employees could be hired permanently, or promoted. Denise aims to set this up as a permanent opportunity for high school seniors and young adults under the Schedule A hiring authority.

JONI PEAKE EINBINDER

> ***Children with special needs need parents with special skills.***
>
> ***- Joni Peake Einbinder***

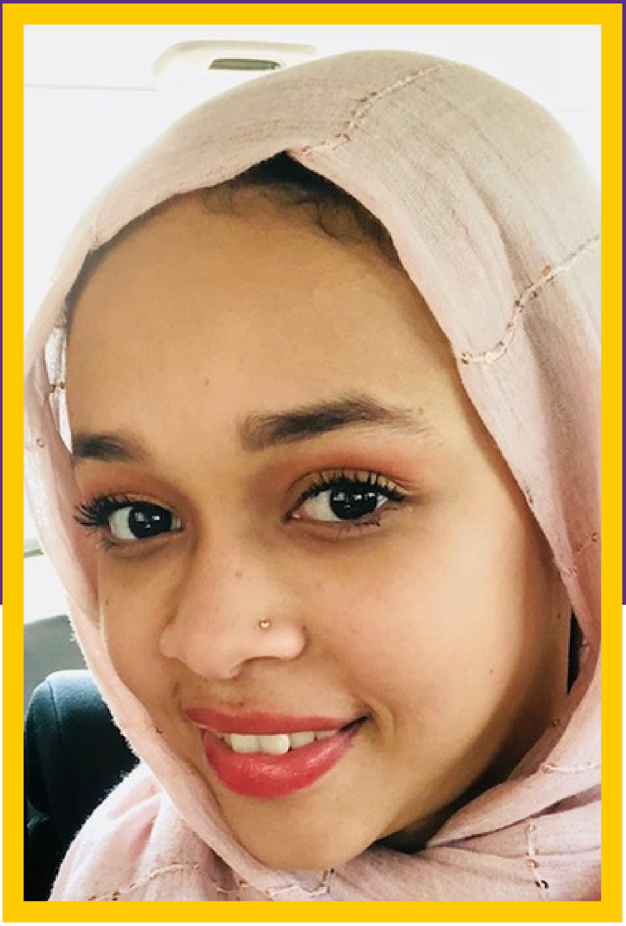
When she was an art teacher in Montgomery County Public Schools, Joni Einbinder had children with special needs included in her classes. With specialized teacher training and extra classroom assistance, Joni and her students successfully engaged in learning about and creating works of art. It was not until her youngest child was born with a poorly understood developmental disability that Joni discovered how challenging it could be for parents to obtain appropriate special education services for their child. She quickly learned that children with special needs need parents with special skills.

In her efforts to discover new information and improve her skills, Joni enrolled in the graduate program in Special Education at Johns Hopkins University. Empowered with the knowledge and skills that she gained, Joni became a Special Education Consultant, advocate, and academic tutor, specializing in dyslexia and executive dysfunction. For Joni, helping children and families overcome the barriers to achieving the best possible educational outcomes has made for a rewarding twenty-year career.

In seeking new challenges and opportunities to use all that she has learned, Joni applied to Partners in Policymaking®. The program has helped Joni adjust her focus from the child and family struggling with the IEP process, to the lawmakers crafting the IEP process. Over the course of the year, Joni learned that Maryland parents, who file for due process in special education hearings, lose their cases at alarming rates. Through Partners, Joni was able to engage with lawmakers in Annapolis and on Capitol Hill. This gave Joni first-hand experience following the legislative process intended to level the playing field in these special education hearings.

Joni plans to join The Arc Maryland's Education Committee for her Capstone project. She will support the committee's work, during legislative session and beyond, to improve the laws governing special education so that every child with a disability receives a free and appropriate special education.

RAZAZ ELTOM



> ***The journey of a thousand miles starts with a single step.***
>
> ***- Lao Tzu***

Razaz, originally from Sudan, embarked on a journey across various cities in the United States with her husband. After seven years of exploration, they established their roots in Maryland, a state they now proudly call home. Razaz is not only a devoted wife, but also a loving mother to two wonderful little boys. Her eldest, Yaseen, is almost six and has autism. Yaseen was diagnosed at age two, which became a defining moment in Razaz's life, sparking her passion for advocating for individuals with neurodiversity.

As a dedicated and compassionate mother, Razaz holds a profound commitment to raising awareness and fostering inclusivity. In 2022, she achieved the prestigious honors status upon successfully completing her MBA from the University of Missouri. Her academic accomplishments are paralleled by her active involvement as an advocate for vulnerable and marginalized groups.

With a robust background in business and entrepreneurship, Razaz brings a distinctive perspective and skill set to her endeavors. Driven by her unwavering determination to make a positive impact, she consistently seeks opportunities to effect meaningful change. Serving as a program coordinator at the American Muslim Senior Society, Razaz remains actively engaged in collaborating with fellow community members to advance and uplift our community to new heights.

Razaz spent the past two years advocating for her son to remain in his current private school, as only two private schools in Montgomery County offer a program that fits Yaseen's needs. Private schools in Maryland reserve the right to deny kids with disabilities admission. This propelled Razaz's dream to start a truly inclusive Waldorf school that does not exclude children with disabilities, her Partners Capstone project. The Waldorf nature-based learning environment proved to help kids with autism and ADHD to thrive. Razaz is in the process of acquiring the necessary licensing to start home-based childcare.

DANIELLE S. JOHNSON

> ***Fight for the things you care about, but do it in a way that will lead others to join you.***
>
> ***- Ruth Bader Ginsberg***

Danielle lives in Howard County and is a mother to three children, Sophie, Fiona and Orion. Orion is seven and was diagnosed with autism when he was two. Originally from Georgia, Danielle moved to Maryland seventeen years ago with her husband, Andrew. Her family feels like Maryland is where they belong and they love being able to experience all the history and culture this area has to offer.

Soon after Orion was diagnosed, Danielle and her husband began to experience difficulties in finding childcare and medical coverage, and they dealt with loss of work due to navigating the processes related to having a child with a disability. Danielle joined Partners in Policymaking® because she wanted to learn more about how to support and advocate for individuals with IDD and their families. In a way, joining the program brought Danielle back to her original love of public and social policy, as she has a Master's degree in Urban Policy Studies. Danielle has worked in higher education most of her professional life, specifically for the past sixteen years at a Maryland Community College. She has held a few different positions, including being an Academic Advisor assisting students to graduate and transfer and currently is a Director in Enrollment Services, focusing on technology. A few years ago, Danielle worked on a project with the Maryland Online Learning Leadership Institute creating documentation to assist higher ed professionals with creating more accessible documents and learning materials.

Danielle hopes to not only use her Partners training in her professional life, but also to be more involved in the community at the local and state level advocating for affordable childcare, camps, and more education resources at both K-12 and post-secondary levels for those with IDD and other disabilities.

Danielle decided her institution needed to offer more professional development opportunities for staff and faculty about working with students with disabilities. Working with the Director of Disability Support Services, they drafted a goal to increase the number of professional development options each year for faculty and staff that will build awareness and increase professionalism for working with students and others who have disabilities. For the first year, the goal is to offer a series of four trainings throughout the year on different topics, starting with offering at least one during the campus-wide Professional Development Day in August.

TAMMY KASKEL

There's a million things I haven't done. But just you wait!

- Alexander Hamilton

Tammy Kaskel is a wife, mother of three wonderful children, and grandmother. She considers herself to be a strong advocate for disability rights. Tammy previously worked in the school system, where she witnessed a great need for advocacy for children with IDD. She was the special education liaison, worked with Therapeutic Recreation, and ran an inclusive performing arts summer camp and musical theater classes.

When her journey took her to The Arc Baltimore, she began as a volunteer before joining their staff; serving as their Coordinator of Family and Independent Living. With The Arc Baltimore, Tammy has been able to continue her advocacy journey by working with the Empowering Partners self-advocacy group and their Mom 2 Mom Support group. During the pandemic, Tammy also helped develop an online Educational Law presentation. She is a volunteer for The Arc Baltimore's Art in the Round fundraiser, a mentor for The Arc Baltimore Leadership Program, and a graduate of MCE Leadership: The Arc, an executive leadership training program.

Tammy feels so grateful to have completed the Partners in Policymaking® course because it has helped her goal to have a larger presence in advocacy for disability rights. She wants to make a difference and inspire others, especially her children, to do the same.

Tammy's Capstone project is creating The Connections Dance. These dances are places where people with IDD, their friends, families, and caregivers can come to have a good time, connect with the community, and dance the night away! The Connections Dance has a nail painting area, temporary tattoos, a game area with cornhole and other fun games, a photo area, a live DJ, and food and snacks for everybody to enjoy! There is also a community news area where everyone can share activities and other events going on as well. Tammy has been in contact with local schools to help get the information about the dances to high school students. The dances are held on the first Friday of the month and each dance has a different theme.

SCAN ME

BROOKE LEVEY

> *Let the shameful walls of exclusion come tumbling down.*
>
> *- President George H.W. Bush*

Brooke Levey has been personally connected to the disability community in Maryland since her daughter was born with Down syndrome in 2008. In 2019, she was hired as the Executive Director of the Down Syndrome Network of Montgomery County (DSNMC), where she is currently employed. As the executive director of DSNMC, Brooke collaborated with diverse organizations, businesses, and agencies to build capacity and support systems for people with Down syndrome and their families. She is committed to helping individuals with Down syndrome and other intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) achieve their full potential, live self-determined lives, and live in communities where they are fully included, valued, and welcomed. She does this through education and support programs, advocacy, and initiatives that span the lives of individuals with Down syndrome from birth through adulthood.

Most recently, Brooke was honored by The Arc Maryland as the 2023 recipient of their Community Professional Award of the Year Award. This award recognizes the honoree's work for having a direct relevance to people with IDD, as well as demonstrating sensitivity and the ability to provide outstanding quality services, resulting in increased independence and inclusive lives for people with IDD. In addition, she was elected as the co-chair of the Special Education Citizens Advisory Committee for Montgomery County Public Schools.

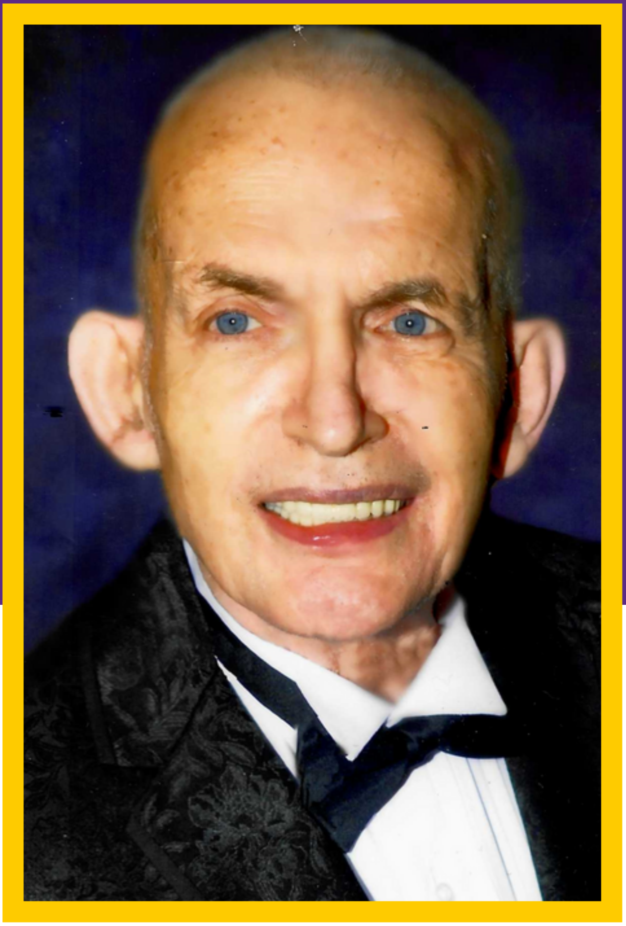
Brooke's greatest strength is bringing people together to set and accomplish goals. She has extensive experience working with diverse groups of people and institutions and building partnerships. She has a Bachelor's degree in Sociology/Anthropology from Earlham College and a Master of Science degree in Environmental Education from Lesley University. She and her husband, Mark Humpert, have three children, Noah, 21, Sam, 17, and Helen, 15.

Brooke's Capstone project is to develop a new Parent to Parent Mentor Program and a Family Individual Education Plan (IEP) Support Program. This mentor program is designed to help families navigate life with loved ones who have Down syndrome. Parents and caregivers often have questions related to doctors, schools, medical procedures, developmental milestones, schools, extracurricular and summer activities, employment, housing, transitioning youth, the IEP process, advocacy, and more. Through this new DSNMC program, Brooke intends to train mentors who will be available and matched with parents requesting support.

SCAN ME

RICHARD LEE LOWRY

> ***Make Everyday Happy.***
>
> ***- Unknown***



Richard began receiving services from The Arc Howard County when he was 32. Above all, he loves having the freedom to make his own choices in all aspects of life.

Prior to his services with The Arc Howard County, Richard was a resident of the Rosewood Center, an institution for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Richard has a unique perspective, as many Marylanders with IDD have fortunately not lived previously in an institution.

During his transition to services, Richard went from “eating a hamburger every day” at Rosewood to learning to choose and cook his own meals. Once out of the institution, Richard found a full-time job and was one of the first people with a developmental disability at The Arc of Howard County to purchase his own home. Richard has received many awards for his advocacy. He currently serves on the Board of Directors for The Arc Howard County.

Today, at age 71, Richard receives residential support and lives in the community with roommates and a live-in caregiver. He is enjoying all that life has to offer and is happy that he has achieved a full, meaningful life.

For his Capstone project, Richard is writing about his experience in the Rosewood Center, as he is grateful for the support of The Arc of Howard County in the time since. His experience transitioning from an institution to a life in the community needs to be heard by all, and serves as a reminder that all people have a right to live, learn, work, and play in the community.

MARY N. MADUKWE

In God we trust.

– Psalm 9:10

Mary N. Madukwe is a registered Nurse, MPH RN BSN. She works in a local hospital to save the lives of the general population. Mary has three beautiful kids: two boys who are 23 and 16 years old, and a girl who is 19 years old. One of Mary's children has a disability. Her child with a disability has unfortunately limited their friendships and community involvement in the neighborhood, but Mary is here to advocate! She has become well-versed in dealing with anxiety, panic attacks, and personal crises.

Mary's Capstone project focuses on continuing her advocacy with the Federal Government to have the full range of special education opportunities in all schools, ranging from elementary and middle to high school. This is very personal project for her since she has faced issues in the school system first hand. Mary knows that many families will benefit from her advocacy efforts.

ALEXANDRA MONROY

> *If opportunity doesn't knock, build a door.*
>
> *– Milton Berle*

Alexandra Monroy lives in Howard County and is a mother to two children, Karla and Johann. Karla is 22 years old, and Johann is 18 years old. Johann was diagnosed with autism when he was seven. Alexandra and her husband have lived in Maryland since 1997. Her husband moved to Maryland after finishing college in Charlotte, North Carolina, and got a job with the U.S. Government. Their children were born and raised in the state.

When Johann was three years old, he attended an Infants and Toddlers program. He had a speech delay and attention deficit disorder. When he was in the first grade, he learned how to read (decoding), but he tested below average in reading comprehension. He was diagnosed with autism after being evaluated by Kennedy Krieger.

The family lived in Anne Arundel County. Johann struggled in school as they did not provide the services he needed. Alexandra fought hard during these years. Johann was eventually offered placement in a private school, but after a visit, Alexandra and her husband realized it was not the proper placement for their son. They ultimately moved to Howard County after hearing good things about the school district. Once there, however, Alexandra found more obstacles. She had to contact the Maryland Department of Education to file complaints against the school, so Johann could receive the services he needed. It has been a journey, but Alexandra has remained a staunch advocate.

Johann is currently in Atholton High School, and he enjoys his experience. The Monroy family is always checking with his teachers to see how things are going, and Alexandra has good communication with her son's case manager to ensure that the school is implementing the services listed on his IEP. Alexandra joined Partners in Policymaking® program to become a better advocate for her son and for other people in the community that need guidance.

Alexandra's Capstone project focuses on navigating the IEP and Transition processes. Drawing from her personal and class experiences, she plans to create a roadmap to help parents navigate the two processes with success.

KATIE O'CONNELL

I have not yet begun to fight.

- John Paul Jones

Katherine “Katie” O’Connell lives in Germantown, Maryland. She attended school in Montgomery County for most of her youth after moving there from Frederick County. Katie became involved with The Arc Montgomery County’s Board of Directors in 2021, serving as a voice for people with IDD in her local community. She is also the group facilitator for STAND Together, a self-advocacy group in Montgomery County that is part of the Empowering Partners program. In her time as the STAND Together group facilitator, Katie has gained confidence and leadership skills, but wanted to take them even further by joining Partners in Policymaking®.

Katie completed an internship with The Arc Montgomery County’s Engagement Department in 2022, where she learned about fundraising and cultivating donors for the chapter, database work, and spreading the mission of The Arc. In her free time, Katie enjoys painting, reading, writing, and playing board games. While she currently lives with a roommate and support staff, Katie's long-term goal is to live on her own. She is also learning how to cook and make healthier lifestyle choices.

Katie chose her favorite quote above because it reminds her of her own journey to independence and the sacrifices that she has made to become her current self. Her Capstone project is a book of poetry, relating to her experiences with advocacy, independence, employment, health and fitness, and partnership with her loved one.

SYLVIE NGUENA OUELEGA

> ***If you change the way you look at things, the things you look at change.***
>
> ***- Dr. Wayne Dyer***

Sylvie was born in Cameroon, in Central Africa. She is a mother of three beautiful daughters. Her first child, Meghan Claude, also known as Marvelous Meghan, is 17 and was diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder in 2009, along with an intellectual disability a few years later. Since then, Sylvie has advocated for Meghan's educational and medical needs. In 2017, as a Certified Public Accountant (CPA), Sylvie felt the need to expand her advocacy journey and support other individuals with IDD and their families; she moved on from her corporate accounting job to pursue her education.

Sylvie earned a second Master's degree in Special Education from George Mason University and became a Board Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA). Sylvie works for a non-profit organization that provides support to individuals with IDD. To date, her advocacy has included traveling to her home country, Cameroon, to raise awareness on autism and other developmental disabilities. She has trained parents, caregivers, and professionals around the globe on behavior management techniques and strategies to help support individuals with IDD. Sylvie has also encouraged Meghan's two sisters to become advocates. Every year Sylvie joins her daughters at their schools during Autism Acceptance Week, where the girls talk about autism and their journey of having a big sister with autism. Sylvie is grateful for her training through Partners, which has equipped her with the tools and encouragement to do more advocacy and include Meghan in the advocacy journey. Prior to attending Partners, Sylvie has spoken for and about Meghan during her advocacy. Now, Meghan joins her and has started her own advocacy journey.

Sylvie and her daughters are working on publishing a children's picture book, *Marvelous Meghan - Our Big Sister*. Through this book, and more series to come, the family plans to raise awareness of autism and other disabilities by sharing their experiences with Meghan. They believe that young children who are taught acceptance, inclusion, and, above all, love will grow up to become great advocates and participate in building a more inclusive and supportive world for all.

Sylvie has found a passion for sharing her experience as a mother of a child with disabilities and as a professional to equip and empower people with disabilities and their families. Sylvie is committed to providing behavior management training remotely and in person to families of people with disabilities from underserved communities in both the United States and Africa.

LORI PLATER

> ***Autism doesn't come with an instruction guide, it comes with a family who will never give up.***
>
> ***- Kerry Magro***

Lori is a wife and mother to two amazing boys living in Charles County. She has a Master of Social Work degree and works as a psychotherapist with a local healthcare organization.

Lori’s seven-year-old son was diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder and ADHD at age two. In the time since, Lori has encountered many obstacles which have motivated her on her advocacy journey. Utilizing her experience with the mental health system, Lori continues to work towards ensuring her son has every opportunity available to live his best life.

Lori’s Capstone project is to work towards increasing parent education regarding the Individualized Education Plan progress. Lori has joined the Board of Directors at The Parents Place of Maryland, a non-profit organization that works to educate parents and allow them to be advocates for their children. Lori plans to join this mission to empower families to advocate in order to improve educational outcomes. Through this collaboration, she will be working to further the goals of The Parents Place of Maryland through advocacy, fundraising, and community education.

ALISHA PRETTO

> *Sometimes the things we can't change end up changing us.*
>
> *– Unknown*

Alisha is originally from the island of Saint Lucia in the Caribbean. She pursued her undergraduate studies in Jamaica and her Master's degree in the United Kingdom, after which she worked with the government of Saint Lucia as an Economic Policy Research Officer. It was during this time that she met her husband. In 2010, Alisha migrated to the United States, got married, and started a family.

Alisha's firstborn, affectionately known as Freedom, was diagnosed at six months with a rare chromosome abnormality: Monosomy 18p Deletion Syndrome. At age two, Freedom had a complete regression where he lost his words, and was later diagnosed with autism. Since his diagnosis, Alisha has dedicated her life to ensuring that her son reaches his full potential and lives his ideal life alongside his two siblings.

To dedicate the time and attention that Freedom needed, Alisha had to resign from full-time employment and has held several jobs as a Direct Support Professional to others. These experiences have helped Alisha gain further insight into the lives of people with disabilities, and provided her with invaluable experiences that made her realize that the many issues that affected her and her family were not unique to her. She understands that many families and individuals with special needs face an uphill battle. Despite his many development and behavior challenges, the family ensures that Freedom is fully integrated into society and community. He enjoys annual visits to his family in Saint Lucia and several family vacations. Freedom enjoys swimming in the ocean, playing in the sand, and taking nature walks.

Alisha's Capstone project focuses on special needs and autism support organizations in Saint Lucia, as she is frequently called upon to determine how she can use her knowledge, experience, and other resources to assist them. Currently, the greatest need she recognized is grant funding and other technical supports that are needed for these organizations to advance their missions. Some of the services these organizations provide include advocating for and serving individuals with disabilities and their families, providing information, training, and support services. There is also a great need for materials and assistive technology. Alisha plans to focus on creating the connections that help empower persons with disabilities in Saint Lucia to live full, meaningful lives.

KHRISTINE SHERMAN

> *We rise to great heights by a winding staircase of small steps.*
>
> *– Francis Bacon*

Khristine, her husband, and her daughter moved from Connecticut to Maryland five years ago and live in Gaithersburg, Montgomery County. Khristine works for MCPS as a Reading Specialist.

Khristine became a 2022-2023 member of The Arc Maryland's Partners in Policymaking® program to learn how to better advocate for her twenty-two-year-old daughter with autism and IDD. Her daughter was a June of 2022 Transitioning Youth graduate from a community-based program offered by Montgomery County Public Schools. After graduation, her daughter had a rocky start and moved from a traditional Developmental Disabilities Administration budget model to a Self-Directed Services model in November, 2022. With multiple outreach attempts, fumbling, and trying again, the year manifested a stellar meaningful day and personal support staff, Madison Fields Farm volunteer work, and entry into "The Sunshine Projects" family.

For her Capstone project, Khristine is sharing "The Sunshine Projects" vision of inclusive living for young adults and adults that respectfully support those with challenges; and includes meaningful day, respite, and residential services. Picture a wide range of living situations for young adults/adults with disabilities, elderly people, and college housing program participants working and living within a campus-like microcosm estate that offers services to the surrounding area. The Capstone project includes researching housing supports, capital grant writing avenues, and community service options that support "The Sunshine Projects" goal of inclusive living options for people with disabilities and their families in Montgomery County.

SCAN ME

LAUREN SHILLINGER

> *Together we can take our struggles from adversity and turn them into actions through advocacy!*

After graduating from Elon University with a degree in Corporate Communications, Lauren had a 12-year career in the electronic healthcare industry. When her daughter Brynleigh was born, she became a stay-at-home mom. Brynleigh was diagnosed at 9 1/2 months with Tuberous Sclerosis Complex (TSC) and epilepsy. Even with her electronic healthcare background, Lauren had never heard the diagnosis of TSC. Since her daughter's diagnosis, the family quickly connected with the TSC Alliance and National Epilepsy Foundation to begin volunteering, advocating, and fundraising for TSC and Epilepsy.

In 2017, Lauren became the Chair of the TSC Alliance Community Chapter in Maryland and began serving on the TSC Alliance committees for Government Relations and Community Outreach. She participates annually in the march on Capitol Hill to secure federal funding for the TSCRP and Epilepsy Hill Days, planned and implemented the first and second TSC MD Day of Advocacy and Awareness in Annapolis, and she advocated for three years for Brynleigh's Act, to pass life-saving legislation through the Maryland General Assembly. At the end of the MGA session in 2022, SB0299 passed unanimously in the Senate and House. On April 12, 2022, the bill was signed into law by Governor Hogan, making Maryland the 15th Seizure Safe Schools state! Lauren has also served as the Walk Chair for the National Step Forward to Cure TSC Walk and various other fundraising events through the years. Lauren is currently a member of the Epilepsy Policy Advisory Committee for the National Epilepsy Foundation. She is completely dedicated to making a difference in not only Brynleigh's life, but all who are affected by TSC and Epilepsy!

Lauren served as a parent advocate on the committee to review, suggest edits, and add resources to the draft and final versions of the seizure guidelines for the Maryland Department of Health, School Nurses, and Board of Education Health Department as the Maryland school systems prepare to implement Brynleigh's Act in the 2023/2024 school year.

SCAN ME

For her Capstone project, Lauren is working with the National Epilepsy Foundation, local physicians, and other local organizations to provide a seizure safe schools parent/caregiver and community webinar in August 2023 in preparation for the school year to begin. The webinar will help explain the updates as Brynleigh's Act is implemented into schools, provide examples of seizure action plans, talk about seizure rescue medications, and have a Q&A with stakeholders.

RACHEL VANECKO

Rachel is a person with intellectual and developmental disabilities from Calvert County. She graduated from high school in 2014.

Rachel enjoys spending time and traveling with her four siblings and nephew. Rachel plans to further her education and has taken classes at her local community college.

Rachel has been a strong advocate for most of her life. She has been a member of People On The Go Southern Maryland for some time and has been active in meeting her local and state legislators to discuss the needs and wants of the community.

Rachel is an outgoing person and an active member of her community. She is grateful to be a participant in the Partners in Policymaking® program and looks forward to using the skills she has learned to continue her advocacy for herself and others.

For her Capstone project, Rachel would like to talk to and educate new local leaders on her interests, including the needs of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

DENNIS WEEDEN

> ***Not everyone will understand your journey. That's fine. It's not their journey to make sense of. It's yours.***
>
> ***- Unknown***

Growing up in a large family of eight children, Dennis learned early on how to advocate for himself. His parents advocated for his right to attend school and ensured he had the support needed to be successful! This showed Dennis that advocacy is never-ending. As he grew into an adult, he began to understand the benefits of self-advocacy. As an individual with an intellectual and developmental disability, Dennis had to learn to navigate not only life, but also adult services.

In a short amount of time, Dennis went from being in high school with friends, to becoming an adult transitioning to a different service model. Dennis was excited to join People On The Go Southern Maryland, where he learned to advocate for his wants and needs. This experience has been instrumental. Dennis had the opportunity to travel with other self-advocates to the State Capitol to meet with Senators, as well as meet with county commissioners to talk about the needs of other individuals in his community. He is honored to be a part of Partners and Policymaking® and looks forward to continuing his self-advocacy after graduating!

Dennis's Capstone project is to improve recruitment efforts for his self-advocacy group, People On The Go Southern Maryland. He is also working and speaking at schools with families, and fairs for mentoring.

MARCUS WHITMAN

> ***Mediocrity knows nothing higher than itself, but talent instantly recognizes genius.***
>
> ***- Arthur Conan Doyle***

Marcus Whitman is an advocate and professional with autism spectrum disorder. Through the support of advocates in his family, friends, and select teachers and doctors, Marcus Whitman has been able to complete goals that others told him were not possible. Marcus has a high school diploma, Associate's degree, and Bachelor's degree from his studies.

While Marcus takes great pride in his educational accomplishments, he has also made advancements in his professional life! In high school, Marcus participated in a work-study program, where he worked at a local Rite Aid pharmacy. In this position, Marcus was the first student participant to be trained as a cashier. Using his skills from the program, Marcus worked in retail and customer service jobs for the next decade. He is grateful for his managers over the years that have created work environments where he can learn, grow, and thrive! From some work opportunities, Marcus also faced hurdles of discrimination in the workplace. He read up on company policies and standard operating procedures to recognize when discrimination occurred. This was a major inspiration for Marcus to study Human Resource Management to assist others in similar situations.

After graduating from Towson University, Marcus looked for roles for over a year before finding his most recent position as a Direct Support Staff Specialist with The Arc Baltimore, where he worked in their Day Program for two years.

Marcus's Capstone project is to assist and educate employees on their rights and how to advocate for themselves, regardless of whether or not they have a disability. He plans to draw from his personal, professional, and educational experiences to improve work environments for all.

SCAN ME

CARRIE WILLIAMS

> ***Do what you can, with what you have, where you are.***
>
> ***- Theodore Roosevelt***

Carrie became an advocate for individuals with Down syndrome when her son, Caleb, was born in April of 2020, five weeks after the Covid-19 pandemic started. She received formal education at the University of Connecticut, graduating with a Master's degree in 2005. She then worked as an outpatient orthopedic physical therapist for 15 years prior to beginning her advocacy journey.

Carrie is a co-leader of the First Call Program of the Down Syndrome Association of Maryland (DSAmd), which supports women and families who have received either a prenatal or birth diagnosis of Down syndrome. She currently works for SilverLeaf Counseling, a therapy clinic focusing on mental health wellness, pregnancy challenges, and infant/child loss. Carrie recently accepted a position at myHana, an online collaborative community that provides support, care management, education and resources for caregivers of those with intellectual or developmental disabilities. Carrie has an amazing husband, Tim, and three beautiful children - Claire, Camille, and Caleb. In her free time, she enjoys cheering on the Washington Capitals, fine-tuning her amateur photography skills, and spending time with family on the Eastern Shore of Maryland.

For her Capstone project, Carrie is creating a social media platform, "Caleb's Corner," where she will highlight amazing individuals who happen to have Down syndrome. Caleb's Corner is a space where advocates, caregivers and family members can receive educational tools and online resources, and the public can learn about (and support!) inclusion in the community.

LISA J. WILSON

He is my world, and I am his voice

- Unknown

Lisa is the proud mother of Blake, who was diagnosed with autism and vision impairments at the age of three after meeting all prescribed childhood milestones. Lisa followed all of the clinical recommendations and immersed Blake in ABA, speech therapy, aquatic physical therapy, and occupational therapy. Blake was later diagnosed with ADHD, dyslexia, dysgraphia, dyscalculia, speech impairments, and developmental coordination disorder. Fortunately, Blake was able to enter general education with special education support.

Unfortunately, by way of personal experience, Lisa began to see the serious fractures in the public school system with respect to Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), and felt her son was suffering from tremendous educational harm. As a result, Lisa became educated about the Individuals with Disabilities Act and emerged as a fierce advocate for Blake. Lisa successfully filed two administrative complaints resulting in compensatory educational services, which have served Blake well to date.

Lisa is a dedicated Equal Employment Opportunity Practitioner and a passionate educational advocate for disabled students. Lisa is a courageous and a strong "autism mommy warrior." Lisa has anonymously guided several families through the initial testing and special education processes. Lisa strongly desires to join the Council of Parent Attorneys and Advocates to offer free services to parents in need of advocacy assistance. It takes courage to advocate in this community.

For her Capstone project, Lisa is preparing a Special Education Guide for Parents navigating special education in Maryland. The Guide contains step-by-step instructions on the following: IEP goals development, self-advocacy, compensatory services, extended school year services (ESY), assistive technology, data collection/analysis, case law interpretation, administrative complaint process, and federal complaint process with the Office of Civil Rights. The Guide will have appendices with forms, sample documents, resources, and case law.

CLASS AUTOGRAPHS!

CLASS AUTOGRAPHS!

THANK YOU TO THIS YEAR'S SPEAKERS

Elizabeth Benavides, Director of Outreach, Hussman Foundation/Hussman Institute for Autism

Lori Berrong, Executive Director, Maryland Technology Assistive Program

Nicholas Burton, M.P.A., Director of Programs, Maryland Department of Health, DDA

Meg Carter, Vice President, SDAN

Guy Caruso Ph.D., FAAIDD; Western Coordinator, Institute on Disabilities at Temple University, Pennsylvania

Congressman Glen Ivey

Sarah Davis, Legislative Fellow for Congressman David Trone

Abigail Cipparone, Legislative Director for Congressman Kweisi Mfume

Katie Teleky, Legislative Director for Congressman John Sarbanes

Daniel Clayton, Press Assistant for Congressman Dutch Ruppersberger

Kristi Culbreth, Statewide Coordinator for Self-Directed Services, Maryland Department of Health, Developmental Disabilities Administration

Mark Dunham, Principal, Kindred Strategies, Patuxent Commons

Adrian Forsythe Korzeniewicz, Partners Graduate

Rochelle Harrod, Prince George's County Independent Living Specialist, Independence Now

Brian Hart, Chief Operations Officer, LADD Inc.

Sharonda Huffman, Director of Housing, Maryland Inclusive Housing

Mary Anne Kane Breschi, Director of Family Supports, Maryland Department of Health, Developmental Disabilities Administration

Hari and Amuthan Kannan, Partners Graduates

Catherine Kirk Robins, Deputy Director, Maryland Citizens' Health Initiative

Karen Lee, Executive Director, SEEC

Rachel London, Esq., Executive Director, The Maryland Developmental Disabilities Council

Michael McSheehan, Owner, Evolve & Effect, LLC.

Christian Miele, Former Deputy Secretary, Maryland Department of Disabilities

Marilyn Morrison, Director, Maryland Work Incentives Network

Tracey Paliath, Esq., Director of Government Relations, Maryland Association of Community Services

Kristen Paul, Early Childhood Specialist, The Parents' Place of Maryland

Eva Queen, Founder & Executive Director, Community Advocates 4 You

Cathy Raggio, Former Secretary, Maryland Department of Disabilities

Victory Ramnarine, Partners Graduate

Mat Rice, Public Policy Director, People On The Go of Maryland

Julie Ryan-Silva, Research & Special Projects, Main Street

Patti Scott, CEO, Neighbours International

Guy Stephens, Founder & Executive Director, Alliance Against Seclusion & Restraint

Jeneva and Robert Stone, Partners Graduates

Tim Villegas, Director of Communications, Maryland Coalition for Inclusive Education

Grace Williams, Partners Graduate

Rhonda Workman, Director of Federal Programs and Integrity, Maryland Department of Health, DDA

Tracy Wright, Director of Training and Advocacy Coordinator, People On The Go of Maryland

Special thanks to speakers/presenters from The Arc Maryland Convention, and members of the Maryland General Assembly who met with us during DD Day at the Legislature.

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The Arc Maryland

Maryland Developmental Disabilities Council
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People On the Go Maryland

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