

Wayne Parker Advocate of the Year Recipients

Belinda Martinez

2014



**Belinda Martinez
with STEP staff
member
Patricia Valladares**

Belinda is the mother of two children, a son who is 10 and a daughter who is 5 from Clarksville, TN. Her journey started when she received the diagnosis from Vanderbilt Children's Hospital of Autism for her son when he turned 3 years old. From that moment she began to look for information and resources. Belinda realized that, in the area she lived at that time in 2006, parents with children with special needs didn't have a contact person to ask for information about resources and other programs, especially for those who were new in the area.

Belinda began to look for information; this was made difficult, with no English and no knowledge about the area of Clarksville (Montgomery County). At the same time, she states: "I started building inside myself the gift to help others, and not allow new parents to be lost without information, resources, support, and training."

In 2009, Belinda began to contact different organizations, non-profits, and government agencies. Belinda shared, "All the organizations that contacted me are very important and special to me. STEP, Inc. was the first organization that I contacted for information and resources of how to manage an IEP. STEP helped me with the tools and education that I needed to help my son to succeed in the school system, as well others families that I support in this area."

Belinda is a volunteer "contact parent" for organizations like Vanderbilt Kennedy Center, Autism Middle TN, STEP, Inc. and other agencies in the Montgomery County area and nearby counties for families with children and youth with autism and other disabilities. She now has a website and Facebook page to provide information to families called Focus Autism Now TN.

Belinda has dedicated countless hours to provide families with information, resources, leadership, and advocacy services for IEP's or any other type of service for the benefit of the individual. In addition, Middle Tennessee organizations contact me to update parents and provide new services for them. All the work that she does is done because she is passionate about helping families; her service to her community is completely free and voluntary. She is an amazing example of using your gifts to "create a brighter future for children with disabilities."

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Debbie Vitale

2013



Debbie Vitale with husband Carmin and STEP Staff members Martha Lopez and Patricia Valladares

Debbie Vitale of Memphis at The ARC received the 2013 Advocate of the Year Award. Debbie is the founding and current President of the Shelby County Regional Special Education PTA (also known as SEPTA), the first special education PTA of its kind in Tennessee which chartered in April, 2012. Prior to the creation of SEPTA, Debbie served as a LEND trainee at the UT Boling Center for Neurodevelopment Disabilities a program which focuses on honing the skills of students/providers-to-be from various disciplines with respect to their advocacy work in the community serving children with different neurodevelopmental disabilities.

Before moving to Memphis, Debbie served as a Social Worker in Ohio. She worked for 15 years with children and families in different community-based programs including being the founding program director of an inner city counseling program and serving as the Director of a Runaway and Homeless youth shelter. She worked as an in-home family therapist assisting families with reunification as well as serving as the program manager for an Intensive Outpatient program with dually diagnosed adolescents. She has also taught at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio.

Debbie's drive for working with Special needs families come from both her social work background and the desire to make sure that everyone feels included and like a valued member of the community as well as her own experience as a parent of a child with special needs.

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Juan Cardona

2012



Juan Cardona with his wife Anna, their daughter Jemima and STEP staff members Patricia Valladares and Joey Ellis

Mr. Juan Cardona received the Wayne Parker 2012 Advocate of the Year Award at the annual Tennessee Disability Mega Conference in Nashville TN in May. Juan is the parent of Jemima, a spirited and loving daughter who has Autism. Juan attended at STEP workshop a couple of years ago and since that time has been not only used that information to help improve outcomes for Jemima, but has assisted many families on their journey to be effective advocates for their children with disabilities.

As a native Spanish speaker, his passion is to ensure that Hispanic families have information in their language. Mr. Cardona and his wife Anna have volunteered countless hours to translating materials to help families understand their rights under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. As the Wayne Parker recipients before him, Juan is devoted to efforts to ensure a brighter future for children with disabilities.

Jessica Jimmerson

2010



Jessica Jimmerson (on right) accepts the award from Jacqueline Sakho, West TN Regional Coordinator

Jessica Jimmerson, an early intervention specialist in Fayette County with the LeBonheur Early Intervention and Development Center received the 2010 Advocate of the Year Award. She has a degree in social work from the University of Tennessee and has been working for over nine years with children with disabilities.

Jessica was nominated for the award by several members of her community who have seen first hand her dedication to making sure families understand their rights and are given opportunities to speak up for their children. Ms. Jimmerson shared with us that her primary interest is advocating for children who have been referred to the mental health system by teachers and schools without having their educational needs evaluated and properly addressed. She currently hopes to improve the quality of special education services available to children in Fayette County by empowering parents with information and helping them become more involved in the team process by partnering with STEP to provide the needed training. Jessica's parents, Jerry and Diane Donahue and her husband Luke attended the awards banquet.

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Trudy Sanders

2009



Trudy and Adam

Trudy Sanders, parent of a young son with a disability, received the Wayne Parker Advocate Award for 2009. Ms. Sanders worked on becoming an advocate since her son's first IEP meeting. Trudy continued to learn her rights, bring ideas to the IEP team to ensure her son was included with peers and doing grade level work. She worked with STEP staff to learn strategies to build relationships with school personnel and to be prepared for her son's IEP meetings. The process for Trudy involved keeping records, gathering data, and being confident and positive in the process. Adam now is on grade level in all subjects. He has been on field trips with supports provided to make that successful. Trudy shares information freely with others; always willing to help a family learn how to navigate the special education maze.

Heather King

2008



**Heather King
with daughter,
Brooklyn**

Heather King, a parent from Hardeman County Tennessee, was honored at the 2008 Disability Mega conference. Heather has two children; Brooklyn is 12 years old and experiences multiple disabilities. Heather has learned to navigate the complicated service delivery system for her daughter, who needs, among other things, nursing services in school. Over the years, she has become increasingly aware of Brooklyn's rights and her own strength as an advocate. Even though she lives in a rural part of West Tennessee, Heather has become a resource for other parents and frequently mentions the impact of her own advocacy upon other children in her area. She has been an inspiration to STEP staff as she has grown in knowledge and skills over the years.

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Coral Getino

2003



Coral Getino

STEP honored Coral Getino with the "Wayne Parker Advocate of the Year Award" at STEP's Annual Conference in 2003. Coral was recognized for the skillful, persistent, and collaborative advocacy for her young son with autism. She was selected from among a number of nominees, all of whom are parents who have turned to STEP for information and support in their efforts to improve the educational experience and outcomes for their children. Coral is a Knox Count reside and we are delighted to recognize her for her amazing dedication and successful advocacy.

Phil & Maureen Deal

2001

STEP honored Phil and Maureen Deal of Chattanooga with the first "Wayne Parker Memorial Parent Advocate of the Year Award" at the 2001 STEP and LRE for Life Conference in Knoxville.