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Thank You!

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Maryland Developmental Disabilities Council
CREATING CHANGE • IMPROVING LIVES

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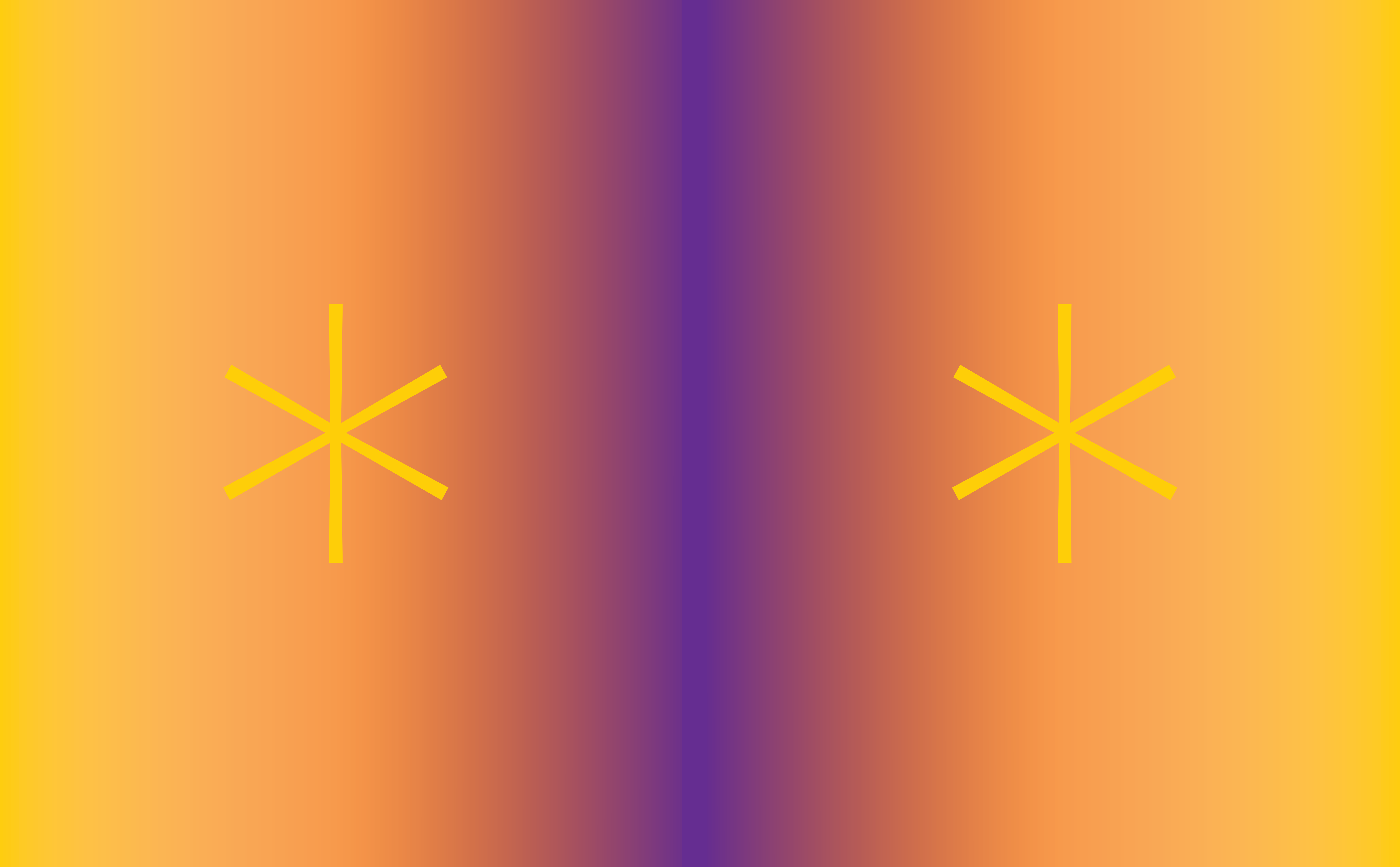
MARYLAND PARTNERS IN POLICYMAKING®

16 Stories About Partners Sparking Change for Marylanders with Developmental Disabilities



How do we spark positive change for Marylanders with Developmental Disabilities?

By enlightening and empowering our community.

Education, connection, and a spark of inspiration – that's how the **Maryland Partners in Policymaking®** program helps family members, disability support professionals, and people with disabilities themselves become the powerful advocates, leaders, and the change makers we need to improve the lives of all Marylanders with developmental disabilities.

In the following pages you will find the stories of 16 graduates who've become change makers, among them self-advocates, parents, and other family members of people with disabilities. Their work ranges from service on boards and commissions, to podcasts and books, to leadership in state and national organizations, and much more. **Since 1996, 446 advocates have graduated from Partners.** They are working together to achieve a vision of shared values about people with disabilities. We are proud of all of them.

Partners in Policymaking® was created in 1987 by the Minnesota Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities after recognizing a need for a formal advocacy training process covering best practices and education on a variety of issues relevant to individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). Currently, **Partners in Policymaking® programs exist in 30 states across the nation**. Maryland's original chapter was active from 1996 to 2007. After an 11 year hiatus, the Arc Maryland relaunched the program in 2018 with incredible financial and technical support from the Maryland Developmental Disabilities Council, and in-kind support from People On the Go Maryland.

Partners in Policymaking® is a year-long course of instruction in the history of the disability rights movement, state and federal policy, inclusive education and life-long learning, life planning, and media skills. During the program, participants hear from 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 form lifelong friendships with their fellow classmates, develop working relationships with established advocates and policymakers, and often become lifelong agents of change in their communities.**

Each year, the staff of Partners in Policymaking selects approximately 30 participants from a competitive application process. If you know of those in Maryland who could benefit from this transformational program and are dedicated to sparking change for people with disabilities, please share this publication with them and direct them our way!

THE ARC MARYLAND works to create a world where children and adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) have and enjoy equal rights and opportunities by adhering to five core values: people first, equity, community, self-determination, and diversity.

THE MARYLAND DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES COUNCIL has been creating change to improve the lives of people with developmental disabilities since 1971. They focus on children, family, and adult issues. The Council is an independent state agency, led by people with developmental disabilities and family members of people with developmental disabilities.

PEOPLE ON THE GO MARYLAND is a group of advocates with intellectual and developmental challenges who use their voices to be heard and recognized. Their vision and values: To advocate, educate and legislate on behalf of individuals with disabilities, parents, caregivers, advocates and legislators about the importance of choice and the freedom it brings with the reward of independence.

For more information on Maryland's Partners in Policymaking® program, and our programmatic and funding partners, please visit www.TheArcMD.org/Partners/ **or send us an email at** Info@TheArcMD.org.

Advocates,
Caregivers,
Entrepreneurs,
Dreamers,
Creators,
Students,
Educators,
Leaders,
Team members,
Organizers,
Legislators,
Activists,
Artists,
Volunteers,
Communicators,
Change Agents,

* Partners

Meeka Caldwell

CLASS OF 2020

My son, Anian, was born with Down syndrome. Even before he was born, I started this journey of information gathering and making connections with families who had children with Down syndrome. I decided to apply to Partners because, while I advocate locally in my community, I really wanted to learn what I can do to make sure Anian's future is filled with expectation and resources and success.

> During Partners, I learned how to talk to legislators. I so enjoyed talking and sharing my story and really understanding how to get legislators to understand what is necessary to meet the needs of all people. You have to understand how to effectively elect people who will have your best interest at heart.

After Partners, I became active in local Down syndrome organizations, and I am now on the Community Advisory Council of the Maryland Center for Developmental Disabilities.

I'm most proud of the series of books my family has created called, "A Friend Like Anian." We started this series because we couldn't find any books with Black characters with Down syndrome. All books we saw, and there were only a few, that had characters who were White. That was not representative of our family. We are working on our 4th book now!

In my opinion, the biggest challenge facing the disability community today is simply being heard. There are so many people making decisions about the disability community that do not have the first-hand experience and don't ask those voices that are most necessary. The most important opportunity facing the disability community now is for self-advocates and families to speak about those things that are necessary for them to live their best life. I think people are ready to listen and make changes.

The wealth of information and encouragement in the Partners program is unmatched. You come out with a renewed sense of purpose and the ability to make those changes that you want.

*2

Justin Valenti

CLASS OF 2019

I am connected to the disability community through self-advocacy groups, like People On the Go Maryland, and an organization called STAND Together. I also participate in a band for people who have disabilities. I am involved with an art studio for people who have disabilities, and I have been a participant in Project SEARCH, which is a job training program for people who have disabilities.

I heard about Partners in Policymaking through Ken Capone from People On the Go Maryland. I had previously never heard of the program because I wasn't as involved with The Arc Maryland as I am now. I decided to apply so that I could improve my self-advocacy skills, which were good but my skills needed some improvement. I had hoped to learn how to become a better self-advocate.

> I would say that Partners in Policymaking helps you improve your advocacy skills so that you are ready when the opportunity to use those skills comes up.

Of the subjects I studied during Partners, the one that taught me the most was disability history. My final project for Partners was inclusive housing. I picked this project because I have some friends who live in apartments that are considered inclusive housing.

I am currently working as an Office Automation Clerk at the National Institute of Mental Health. The part of my current advocacy work that I'm most proud of is my board membership with The Arc Maryland. The board meets about six times per year and we talk about issues related to people who have disabilities. At our meetings, we also talk about how The Arc of Maryland is spending its money and making a difference in the lives of disabled people.

In my opinion, a big challenge facing the disability community is getting laws that benefit disabled people passed by Congress. Transportation is also another challenge, especially for those who live in other parts of Maryland besides Montgomery County.

*3-4

Lauren Ochalek & Liz Zogby

CLASS OF 2021

In 2020, Lauren and Liz were asked to reinstate the Maryland Down syndrome Advocacy Coalition (MDAC), a collaboration of self-advocates, allies, and organizations committed to ensuring that people with Down syndrome have the opportunity, encouragement, and support required to lead a self-determined life.

LAUREN

Growing up alongside a friend with Down syndrome, I dreamed of a career working with children who have disabilities and unique medical needs. I became a pediatric nurse, eventually receiving a master's degree in nursing education. My life changed forever when our daughter Ellie was born with Down syndrome. Since then, I have served in various leadership roles with several disability related organizations. Today, I have earned certification as a Master IEP Coach®, I am a proud Partners in Policymaking® graduate, and I recently completed the Arc@School's Advocacy Curriculum. Along with Liz Zogby, I co-chair the Maryland Down Syndrome Advocacy Coalition and I also serve on the board of directors for the Down Syndrome Association of Maryland.

As an advocate passionate about inclusive education and communities, I have a great interest in advancing policy through both grassroots and legislative advocacy in support of a more inclusive world for everyone. I am so incredibly grateful for Partners in Policymaking® and all of the ways the program built my confidence as an advocate, helping me find my voice and make myself heard with grace, grit, and compassion.

LIZ

My daughter Hope also has Down syndrome. I applied to Partners because I wanted to become a better advocate for the Down syndrome community and the disability community generally. Partners has had a tremendous impact on my life. Lauren and I successfully relaunched MDAC on World Down Syndrome Day, March 21, 2021. Since then, we have brought together the five major Down syndrome groups across the state and dozens of advocates, and established a powerful steering committee with representation from across the state.

Secondly, I am directing a grant-funded project focused on statewide special education policy advocacy, collaborating with advocates representing diverse perspectives and helping to shape a special education policy agenda to advance with policymakers and legislators. I was recently appointed to co-chair, along with the State Superintendent, the Blueprint Special Education Workgroup to comprehensively review special education in Maryland and make recommendations to improve education for students with disabilities.

*5

Grace Williams

CLASS OF 2001

I heard about Partners from alums who were in the Autism Society of America and The Arc local chapters. I decided to apply to learn more about public policy at the local, state, and federal levels, and to learn to navigate the system of services for my children and all children.

Of all we studied in Partners, I learned the most from the units on how the government works, and the one on funding for disability services. For my final project, I chose increasing respite care services for families. There were not enough wrap-around services for those with intellectual and developmental disabilities from the Maryland Developmental Disabilities Administration (DDA) through their Medicaid waivers. Without these, advocates could not continue their passionate work for those with disabilities.

After Partners, I've served on many boards and committees, including the Maryland Developmental Disabilities Council and The Arc of Maryland. I've served on several DDA committees, including the Transition Advisory Team, and I was Chair of the DDA Quality Advisory Council. I've also held paid positions with The Parents' Place of Maryland and Maryland Family Voices. Most recently, I was the Assistant Director of Public Policy & Advocacy with The Arc of Maryland.

I'm most proud of my work with the Maryland General Assembly to remove the phrase "mental retardation" from Maryland statute and replace it with "intellectual disability." This was in accordance with the passage of Rosa's Law in 2010, a federal law to eliminate this phrase from state and federal code.

In my opinion, the biggest challenges facing the disability community today are gaps in adult services and access to appropriate health care services.

If someone asked me, "Why should I apply to Partners in Policymaking?," I would tell them that Partners will help you learn to navigate government systems and public policy not only for your children, but for all children and adults with disabilities, in order to make a difference at the local, state, and national levels.

*6

Angie Auldridge

CLASS OF 2019

My son Mark has a rare genetic disorder, SCN2A, which causes autism, epilepsy, and other neurological conditions. In 2015, I began a blog, "Mighty and the Bean," which chronicled my adventures raising a disabled child. As time went on, I began writing for other websites and blogs on genetic research, community inclusion, and special education.

I first heard about Partners through the blog "Finding Cooper's Voice." I knew that I had a lot to say in support of people with disabilities, but no clue where to find the megaphone to make a difference. Through Partners, I hoped to learn from more seasoned advocates and from people with disabilities themselves.

Of all we studied, learning how bills are created and signed into law was most impactful. I also learned how to give written and oral testimony. Suddenly, I had the megaphone I was looking for. This knowledge helped me draft written testimony in support of Maryland's adult changing table bill, as well as coach my daughter to provide oral testimony on it.

For my final project, I created a resource guide for families in Washington County whose children were enrolled in Special Education. This evolved into the Disability Resource Guide, which is posted on the Washington County Government's website. The western part of Maryland can be a resource desert, so supplying information and support to people who need it was rewarding.

Since graduation, I've been appointed to the Maryland Developmental Disabilities Council, the Washington County Disabilities Advisory Committee, The Arc of Washington County, and the Special Education Citizens Advisory Committee. I co-host a podcast, "Embracing Holland," which showcases creative and impactful work by families of children with disabilities.

> Having a seat at the table where policy decisions are being made is critically important. Nothing is more powerful than being a part of Partners. You'll have people on your side who also want to push up their sleeves and fight to make the world a better place.

7

James "Rico" Winston

CLASS OF 2020

I am a single parent of an amazing little superhero, my 13-year-old son Isra'El, who has a diagnosis on the autism spectrum. I applied to Partners to help my son on the road to self-advocacy by learning skills and strategies to make myself a better advocate. I also wanted to form relationships with others who understand the challenges and rewards of caring for a loved one with developmental differences.

> My favorite part about Partners, without hesitation, was the friendships and relationships that I forged. The way you change the world isn't by doing it alone, but by doing it together.

It was eye-opening for me as a man of color to learn that the history of disability, social, and legal battles by disabled individuals is firmly rooted in the Civil Rights Movement by people of color.

Since graduating from Partners, I've been appointed to the Board of Directors of The Arc Baltimore, as well as to the Scientific Advisory Board and the Community Advisory Council of Spark for Autism. In addition, I'm a committee member of the Friends of CARD (Center for Autism and Related Disorders) at The Kennedy Krieger Institute.

Presently I am sharing with other parents the advocacy knowledge and awareness that I acquired through Partners, as well as my experience raising and loving a child on the autism spectrum. Partners allowed me to discover my life's purpose and work. Empowering my son through his journey of self-advocacy has been amazing for me as a father.

Isra'El is well on his way to self-advocacy. Two of the most powerful moments for me as a father were, one, during an IEP when Isra'El, for the first time, spoke on his behalf as a self-advocate. The second was during "Advocacy 101," an event sponsored by The Arc Baltimore. Isra'El and I portrayed superhero advocates. Listening as my son shared with the audience the importance of self-advocacy is an experience I will never forget.

*8

Amanda Del Reigo

CLASS OF 2019

I have a disability. Growing up, I went to school in Prince George's County in classrooms with other students who had a variety of disabilities. And I've always been involved with the Maryland School for the Blind. I attended a four-week camp there every year to learn independent living skills.

Ken Capone of People On the Go Maryland told me about Partners. I applied because I really felt like advocacy is my work. Ken and Tami Goldsmith thought it would help me during the legislative session in Annapolis.

During Partners, my personal goal was to be able to tell people what I wanted without hesitating, so I could better talk to legislators and prepare to give testimony. The hearing clock in the General Assembly runs pretty fast! As a result of Partners, I was able to speak successfully at the 2021 budget hearing for the Developmental Disabilities Administration. I'm more confident with my words. I don't hesitate as much.

My favorite part of Partners was Developmental Disabilities Day. We went on the Senate floor, and I saw the technology – the different-colored lights – that signal voting actions for the delegates. It was a wonderful learning experience. I'm proud to report that I'm on The Arc Maryland's Legislative Committee.

Since graduating, I've been appointed to the board of People On the Go Maryland. An important issue for us is transportation. A disabled person can't get accessible transportation from Baltimore to Montgomery County. Where I live now, Howard County, I have to be driven everywhere. I'd rather take my own transportation, which is a part of independent living. Housing is another issue. I'm working on getting my own apartment, but it isn't easy.

> If someone asked me, "Why apply to Partners?," I'd say that I came out a better person than ever before. I've always been shy and afraid, but Partners boosted my confidence. Now I'm able to say, I want to go look at an apartment!

*9

Eva Queen

CLASS OF 2019

For over 30 years, I have worked within the disability community in various roles, including a direct-care support person, middle management/administrative, and as a professional sign language interpreter. I whole-heartedly believe that my past work experience served to prepare me for life as the parent of a disabled child.

During my tenure at the Center for Autism and Related Disorders (CARD) at Kennedy Krieger Institute, I was referred to the Partners program by a colleague. When I learned about how comprehensive it was, I knew I wanted to participate.

> The lesson I gleaned the most knowledge and enthusiasm from was about communicating with legislators on key issues related to disability advocacy. As an African American woman, I've used those skills to advocate for social justice, equity, and the rights of people with disabilities—especially those of color—for my child and my community.

After Partners, my advocacy has increased exponentially. I launched a nonprofit, Community Advocates 4 You, Inc., which supports families of disabled children through parent training, advocacy, and referrals. We've partnered with Kennedy Krieger's Therapeutic Foster Care Program and Baltimore City Public Schools' Partners for Success. I was awarded the William Hoffman Community Partner Award by Kennedy Krieger in 2023.

I believe the biggest challenges facing disabled persons are the aging disability community, housing, jobs, and independence. Schools are poorly preparing disabled students for success. Colleges are not prepared to receive disabled students. And our people are not appropriately connected to service agencies, especially minority persons with disabilities. We have come a long way, but here is still much work to do.

Participation in the Partners in Policymaking® program has meant the world to me, and not just because of the lessons learned. My friendships from Partners remain a special part of my life to this day.

*10

Kim McKay

CLASS OF 2003

I’m a parent of a child with autism. I’m married to a pediatrician and my best friend is a special educator. These incredible resources have been at my fingertips day and night, but I still felt overwhelmed and intimidated by Maryland’s service systems. I couldn’t imagine how families without my resources could navigate if I had so much difficulty. I knew that I needed to apply to Partners to help create better service delivery models. There is no better program to prepare you to make change!

> Partners introduced me to many disability leaders, both national and local. I learned so much from their presentations to the group, and also just from having lunch with them. These leaders were not "experts" at the beginning of their advocacy journeys—they were just passionate about disability issues, as I was. They gave me the confidence to step into advocacy in a bigger way.

During Partners, I learned the most about disability history. Things like the ADA and FAPE (Free Appropriate Public Education) are taken for granted now, but they were not always the law. If my son had been born 25 years earlier, he would have been institutionalized, without opportunity for school, work, or community.

Following Partners, I worked at the Maryland State Department of Education, implementing the Birth-to-21 Family Support Model in Special Education. At The Parents' Place of Maryland, I created the LEADers advocacy program (modeled on Partners!). I’m currently Assistant Secretary of Programs for the Maryland Department of Disabilities.

An important opportunity facing the disability community right now is the future of work. For years, disabled job seekers have asked for and been denied the accommodations put in place during the pandemic. As a culture, we've learned that working from home is possible. This is a golden opportunity to challenge the business community to re-think how work is done. An incredible pool of talent within the disability community has yet to be tapped!

Donné Settles Allen

CLASS OF 2019

In hindsight, I had a longing to see people with disabilities integrated throughout my community since I was a child, but didn't recognize that until I became a mother to a son born with multiple disabilities.

I love the quote by historian John Henrik Clarke: "History tells a people where they still must go and what they still must be." Hearing stories about disabled people who literally fought against policies that did not include them was empowering for us as budding advocates in the Partners program. It is important to know who the people were that came before us so that we can empower this generation of advocates to fill in gaps that still exist.

Since graduating from Partners, I have become a certified coach with Charting the LifeCourse Framework. I walk participants through a collaborative six-week course on a set of principles and tools that help people identify, plan, and develop a vision for a good life. As a member of the Maryland Community of Practice statewide leadership team, I have presented to a variety of audiences on LifeCourse tools. I am also a board member with Maryland Coalition for Inclusive Education where I bring the perspective of a parent raising a child fully included in the school setting. I am currently the Director of Projects at SEEC.

> My most important advocacy work takes place at home. I'm teaching my son how to develop his advocacy muscle and plan for a life that is meaningful to him.

He has spoken to groups of children in his school and community about how they must proactively ensure that every environment is inclusive of everyone. He has educated his school administration on ensuring that disabled children have educational access and how to be creative without a budget. That makes me the most proud because he's leaving an impact wherever he goes and encouraging the people around him to raise their expectations for disabled people.

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Robert Stone

CLASS OF 2020

I have a rare disease, Dystonia 16, and I am a proud member of the disability community. I began my advocacy by doing videos on rare disease when I got my diagnosis at the age of 15. The videos were for Rare Genomics Institute, the group that helped me access genome sequencing.

During high school at Walt Whitman, I was a member of the Best Buddies club where I made many friends. I'm now a member of Best Buddies at UMD College Park. I take Challenge courses in music at Montgomery College. I sell prints of my art on my website. I sell my art at conventions and other places, too. I take art classes at VisArts, and I have my own artist website. I write poetry and set it to music with my uncle Peter, who is a professional singer.

> I wanted to become an advocate because I like speaking up for disabled people, and I like being a leader.

I love Little Lobbyists! I've spoken at events at the U.S. Capitol, and Representative Jamie Raskin recognizes me when he sees me. I know all my D-16 members in Maryland's General Assembly, and I've testified in Annapolis.

I applied to Partners because advocacy isn't just about the fun stuff; it's also hard work and I had a lot to learn. I loved learning about disability rights and history because I want to continue the struggle for rights. For my final project, I reviewed the movie "Crip Camp," starring one of my heroes, Judy Heumann.

After graduating from Partners, I've continued my advocacy. I'm part of a General Assembly legislative workgroup on self-directed services so lawmakers understand what disabled people need to live their best lives. I've been in Self-Directed Advocacy Network videos.

I was on a panel at The Arc Maryland's 2021 Annual Convention, "Leaders of Tomorrow: Advocates of the Future." I used my eye-directed communicator to say I thought my mom talked too much, and I'd like to talk more. People really liked that. Disabled people need to speak for themselves. They should be valued for the creative community members they are.

*13

Jeneva Burroughs Stone

CLASS OF 2020

I didn't officially become an advocate until I was 54. My son Rob decided he wanted to be an advocate when he transitioned from the school system to adult services. Throughout Rob's life, I believed he could be included everywhere. I mean, everywhere.

So when Rob wanted to be an advocate, I thought, great! On his behalf, I approached Little Lobbyists, a family-led organization advocating for children with complex medical needs and disabilities. Soon, we were heavily involved, and I became their blog manager. That's how we heard about Partners.

> The Partners program became a key to unlocking difficult issues Rob has faced, and a springboard to action for me. Our family and thousands of Marylanders with disabilities face the same fear: being institutionalized.

My final Project for Partners was "Ending Institutional Bias in Maryland." Despite the closure of Rosewood, Maryland's "last institution," the state still warehouses those who require skilled nursing care, often in Delaware. Because Rob has a tracheostomy, by law in Maryland he must be accompanied by a skilled nurse or a parent at all times. What will happen when my husband and I are gone? The Division of Nursing Services will not provide 24/7 home care. That's unacceptable. I know there are policy solutions.

As I've worked to understand state and federal systems that perpetuate institutional bias, I've gotten to know the local and national disability communities. I've been appointed to the Montgomery County Commission on People with Disabilities, joined the Self-Directed Advocacy Network, and serve as co-ambassador for the Rare Action Network. I've testified in Annapolis and spoken at events at the U.S. Capitol.

I never thought I could do this; I never thought I could make a difference. As usual, Rob led the way. I can't let him and others down. The Supreme Court's Olmstead Decision gives all disabled people the civil right to live in their communities. I won't let bad policy take that away.

Dominique Palmer

*14

CLASS OF 2021

I have a disability. In early 2020, I started a support group for young people with disabilities called Community Building Blox. My mother and I decided to apply to Partners to find out about policies and laws impacting people with disabilities. We also wanted to learn to better advocate for ourselves and others.

My final project for Partners was starting a non-profit foundation for young adults with disabilities. I always wanted to have my own business. I also love connecting with and helping others. My mother and I started the S.E.E. Foundation, Inc., which stands for "Socially Equipping Everyone." Many times, people do not know how to interact with a person with a disability. Our goal is to improve how each side "sees" each other and works together. We have virtual classes and activities to keep the young adults engaged. We've partnered with MakingChange, Inc., to deliver a virtual "Smart About Money" class. We've had two virtual game nights and lots of engaging and enriching classes and activities, including a virtual cooking class, health and wellness, and crafts. In 2023, we continued our programming and grew our network.

Our long-term goal is to have a recreation center that young people with disabilities can go to and have community.

> I am most proud of my ability to meet new people as I learn more about advocacy and living with a disability. I enjoy bringing people together to make this world a better place.

The biggest challenge to the disability community today is getting rid of closed-mindedness. People with disabilities are human beings with needs just like the rest of the world. There is no one-size-fits-all. We have differing abilities and needs. One person may not be able to tie their shoes without assistance, one may not be able to read, and another may not be able to walk or talk. At the end of the day, we are all people that deserve to be treated with respect.

*15

Laura LeBrun Hatcher

CLASS OF 2019

As a designer, communications consultant and educator, my work is dedicated to supporting organizations that make a difference, like the Maryland Developmental Disabilities Council and The Arc, whose missions are close to my heart as the mom of a child with developmental disabilities.

My son Simon loves art and music and has one of the best laughs you've ever heard. He also has cerebral palsy, hydrocephalus, epilepsy, autism, and a unique genetic disorder. Like many parents of children like Simon, I've been advocating for my son since he was born – in doctor's offices, schools, and the community.

In 2017, when Congress tried to defund Medicaid and repeal the protections of the Affordable Care Act that Simon and millions of people with disabilities need, I joined a small group of families like mine to advocate on Capitol Hill. We introduced our kids to legislators so they'd understand whose lives were at stake in their votes. Our group became Little Lobbyists, a family-led organization advocating for kids with complex medical needs and disabilities.

As part of Little Lobbyists, I found myself advocating on a level I'd never imagined. I was grateful for the opportunity, but I knew I had a lot to learn and I prayed I'd find a way to learn it quickly.

That winter my prayer was answered. While attending Developmental Disabilities Day to support the launch of the "*Expectations Matter, Expect Ability*" campaign I'd worked on with the Maryland Developmental Disabilities Council, I heard about the re-launch of an advocacy training program called Partners in Policymaking®. I applied immediately.

Through Partners I found the education I needed, and so much more. I learned about policy, was introduced to experts, provided with invaluable resources, and connected to a vibrant community of advocates and friends.

> Partners taught me about the disability civil rights movement and gave me the education I needed to find my place in it.

Today I'm part of Little Lobbyists' leadership. I've testified for health care and disability rights in Maryland's General Assembly and the U.S. House of Representatives. I educate legislators, the administration, and the public about the policies that impact our families. Most of all, I help empower fellow advocates to join me – as Partners we can create the future all our families deserve.

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Hari Kannan

CLASS OF 2021

I am a 21-year-old young man, who loves to workout, stay fit, and enjoys music. I am a Best Buddies Maryland State Ambassador and a member of the University of Maryland chapter. I'm also a self-advocate board member of the Down Syndrome Network of Montgomery County (DSNMC). As part of the DSNMC board, I participate in monthly meetings and plan community events for young people in our community. I recently graduated from the TerpsEXCEED program at the University of Maryland, College Park. I lived in a dorm on my own and attended classes with other UMD students. I loved my two years at UMD. I have also created a podcast called “Industry of Simple Life” and I talk to my guests about how they handle things in their lives. And I was born with Down syndrome.

My dad is a graduate of the Partners in Policymaking® program, and he encouraged me to apply. I wanted to be an advocate for inclusion of people like me with disabilities, and I hoped to learn more about advocacy from the program. My favorite part of Partners was meeting new people during the break-out sessions. Of the subjects we studied, I learned the most from “Learning How Government Works”.

> I liked learning about how there are many laws to help people with disabilities. This helped me when I was at the US Capitol Hill last summer advocating for post-secondary education opportunities for young adults with intellectual disabilities.

My final project was "Insights on Inclusion." I interviewed a few people regarding their thoughts on inclusion and how inclusion benefits everyone. I'm a strong advocate for inclusion of people with disabilities and that is why I chose this project.

I've been at different events speaking about the inclusion of people with disabilities and I'm proud of this. I want to continue to speak publicly about inclusion. In my opinion, the biggest challenge facing the disability community today is lack of inclusion for adults, in areas like postsecondary education and jobs. Young adults with disabilities are losing social opportunities, and want to be part of the communities where we live.

If someone asked me, “Why should I apply to Partners in Policymaking?,” I would say, "You learn a lot in the Partners program. You meet a lot of people with similar goals. You learn how to make laws to protect people with disabilities."

Thank you to the Partners who shared their stories for this publication.

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