

Maryland

# Partners in Policymaking®



Class of  
**2024**



# Congrats to the 2024 Maryland Partners in Policymaking® Graduating Class!

Our 2024 Maryland Partners in Policymaking® class met together from October 2023 to September 2024. 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 Maryland 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 people with IDD. This program provides the tools and resources that people with IDD and family members need to become effective change-makers on local, state, 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 2024 Partners class. We are excited to see how they will use their drive, passion, and the connections and skills they have 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 the Class of 2024... 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: 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



# About the Program

The Arc Maryland, with the Maryland Developmental Disabilities Council and People On the Go Maryland, are excited to acknowledge the 2024 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, close to 480 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/](http://www.MN.gov/MNDDC/PIPM/). To learn more about the Maryland Partners in Policymaking® program, go to [www.TheArcMD.org/Partners/](http://www.TheArcMD.org/Partners/).

## Table of Contents

This Year in Partners	4
Emmanuel Oladele Akano	5
Shameen E. Anthanio-Williams	6
Ani Blackhorse Begay	7
Steve Brent	8
Rusty Buchanan	9
Elaine Carney	10
Rachel Coates	11
Jessica L. Cook	12
Cristina J. Easton	13
Ulric Erickson	14
Kari Fisher	15
Opal Foster	16
Carla Fuenzalida	17
Rachel Sabrina Gaddy	18
Gretchen B. Gillespie	19
Chiquita Hutton	20
Jessica Johnson	21
Crystal Joy Jones	22
Meghan Konka	23
Stacy Lurie	24
Demetria Marshall-Leonard	25
Dave McCormack	26
Rebecca Mestas	27
Dr. Richard Leon Riley	28
Kim Schofield	29
Jareese Bea-Anna Shirlee, LT, USN, MSC	30
Parish Darshae’ Smith	31
Lee Anne Spear	32
Tanya M. Steele Clements	33
Elizabeth Totah	34
Pamela Williams	35
Katie York	36

# 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.

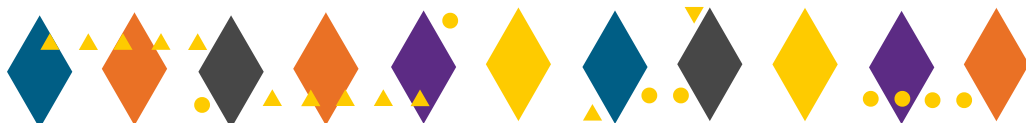
**This Year's Partners Sessions Highlighted:**

- The History of Disability Advocacy**
- State Laws & Policy & Those Who Create Them**
- Inclusive Education & Lifelong Learning**
- Assistive Technology & Media Skills**
- Behavior as Communication**
- Developmental Disabilities Day at The Legislature**
- Developing & Living Your Ideal Life**
- Federal Advocacy**
- Independence in The Community**
- Advocacy in Action**
- The Arc Maryland Statewide Convention**
- Taking Your Place on Boards, Commissions & More**
- Graduation**



**32 Marylanders** successfully completed the training series and joined the distinctive ranks of Partners alumni.

The 2024 Partners were tasked with creating Group Capstone Impact Projects to enhance their experiences working as a coalition of change agents. Class members were tasked with identifying issues within their local communities and crafting plans of action for positive change.



# EMMANUEL OLADELE AKANO

*He/Him/His*

“—  
| *Accept who you are; and revel in it.*

- *Mitch Albom*

Dr. Emmanuel Akano is a neurologist with a federal agency in the DMV area. Originally from Nigeria, he resides in Montgomery County with his wife and three boys. His exciting, though initially uncertain, journey in advocacy was inspired by his own family's journey. Emmanuel and his wife eagerly looked forward to the delivery of their

first child, born nine years ago, but life had a heart-wrenching twist. He and his wife noticed their son had speech delays, made repetitive hand movements, had endless tantrums, would wander and elope from safe environments, was hyperactive, and displayed other concerning symptoms and behaviors. Their beloved son was diagnosed with autism at a young age and was recently diagnosed with ADHD. While there are certainly periods of hopefulness and cheerfulness as Dr. Akano ponders his son's future, he also worries about how to keep him safe now, and what the future holds for him.

Despite his medical background and being married to an educator wife, he encountered immense challenges in navigating appropriate care and school placement for his son. These challenges ignited a passion for advocacy, stirring up a determination to help streamline pathways for other families and champion better resources, community awareness, and fully integrated care options. Emmanuel participated in the Family Leadership Institute of the Maryland Coalition for Families and this Partners cohort to become better equipped with information and resources for the future. He is passionate about inclusive care, particularly for minority families, and fostering understanding and acceptance of people with developmental disabilities within the faith communities.

Dr. Akano's Group Capstone Impact Project focuses on meaningful after-school initiatives for students. The project goal is to create inclusive, accessible resources for families and providers throughout the state.





# SHAMEEN E. ANTHANIO-WILLIAMS

*She/Her/Hers*

“—  
*Don't say disability. I am not special needs.*

*- Lil Miss Savannah Kya Williams,  
Special Olympics Ambassador*

Guard Academy and earned an MS Degree in Project Management from George Washington University. She was later certified as a Project Management Professional. In her twilight assignment, as an acquisition director and liaison at the Pentagon, she decided to step away from her career to be a full-time homemaker.

Now retired, Shameen reflects on the challenges and triumphs of raising a family with varying needs; the miracles of her eldest daughter, now 20, who was born with Wolf Hirschhorn (4P-) Syndrome, her son, who faced a life-threatening medical condition before the age of one, and her son who became the binding light for his siblings. Many hours were spent praying, researching, nurturing, and advocating for her children. It is no surprise that Shameen is built this way; she remembers her mother as a parent-advocate raising two daughters in New York City's overcrowded public school system while fervently pressing for services for her deaf sister; services that did not exist like they do today. The courage to speak for those in need and the drive to encourage and empower the overlooked came from watching her mother.

Shameen is also a children's book author, amateur fitness bodybuilder, and certified personal trainer. She is pursuing her doctorate in Public Policy at Liberty University. Shameen currently resides in Spencerville, MD, with her husband and children. Her latest children's book, *Anne Sullivan; World's Greatest Teacher*, is about the legally blind teacher of Helen Keller and was just released.

Shameen and the "Team Holly" Group Capstone Impact Project conducted a preliminary investigation on the political and community climate surrounding the Holly Center Institute. Through their research on the history of state institutions for people with IDD, interviews with People On the Go Maryland leadership, and their visit with the Holly Center Institution, the team developed a better understanding of arguments for the closure of the Institution. Team Holly will share findings and provide commentary on a video, distributing it to advocacy groups and on social media.

**Get My Book:**



# ANI BLACKHORSE BEGAY

*She/Her/Hers*

“—

*Beauty radiates within me. Beauty is before me. Beauty is behind me. Beauty is below me. Beauty is above me. There is beauty all around me. We seek for balance in this world. If there is injustice we speak up. But we always walk in beauty.*

*- A Navajo Prayer*



Ani is a citizen of the Navajo (Diné) Nation. Originally from Two Grey Hills & Fruitland, New Mexico, she has called the DMV home for the past decade. Active in her community, she strongly advocates for Native American rights and issues, children with disabilities rights, LGBTQ2S+ rights, and women's rights.

Ani has served as Co-Director of Protect Native Elders, an organization developed during COVID-19 to give necessary supplies to Indian Country's most vulnerable people & tribes. She served as a Commissioner in Howard County's Renaming Commission and has executed seven successful Native American Heritage Months within Howard County. Ani is currently serving as a Commissioner under Governor Wes Moore for the Maryland Commission of Indian Affairs.

Ani has also received numerous awards and accolades, from both her community and the state of Maryland for her devotion to helping bring awareness to her Native people.

Ani has partnered with classmates Stacy, Rick, Meghan, and Katie to help increase meaningful inclusion in neighborhood schools for their Group Capstone Impact Project. They are in the process of developing a roadmap with resources and recommendations for schools to implement. This project will help various Special Education Citizens' Advisory Committees (SECAC) in Maryland find existing programs.



# STEVE BRENT

*He/Him/His*

“—  
| *Leave no one behind.*

- *Wes Moore*

Steve Brent was born in Washington, D.C., and raised in Virginia. As a young adult, he moved to Maryland, which he has since called home! Steve has a wide range of work experience, including woodworking, retail, hospitality, and healthcare. He currently works as one of the front desk receptionists at the Jubilee Association of Maryland.

Steve is a long-time self-advocate, which brought him to join the Maryland Partners in Policymaking® program. He is an active member of the Jubilee Client Council, which provides input from individuals who receive services from the Provider Organization. Over the years, Steve has held leadership positions on the Client Council, including President and Vice-President. Upon graduation from the program, Steve looks forward to continuing his advocacy journey locally and statewide.

Steve's Group Capstone Impact Project focused on increasing accessible and affordable housing in Maryland. His group met with experts in the field to discover common barriers people with intellectual and developmental disabilities face with housing and understand what advocacy is needed in this area.



# RUSTY BUCHANAN

*He/Him/His*

“—  
*Never give up, no matter how hard it gets.*

*- The Emerald City of Oz*

Russell "Rusty" Buchanan has spent most of his life Cockeysville, located in Baltimore County. With his friendly nature and the strong relationships built with neighbors in the Springdale community, Rusty runs a lawn and snow removal service in the area.

Rusty considers himself a survivor. He has struggled with his mental health, including depression, after his father passed away in 1997. With the support of his mother, friends, and counselors, Rusty received support and encouragement to carry himself through this difficult time.

Rusty is a seasoned Special Olympics athlete, participating in alpine skiing, golf, kayaking, bowling, flag football, and soccer. After a church friend suggested Rusty look into joining the Special Olympics in 2016, he joined the skiing team that winter, and enjoyed a great season. Those Winter Games were held at Whitetail Resort in Pennsylvania, where Rusty won a gold medal. The experience was amazing for Rusty, and he felt his dad's presence then and there with him. It was like a full circle - from first learning to ski in 1991 to winning a medal in 2016. The Special Olympics gave Rusty the opportunity to persevere through his challenges, and enjoy sports again with many new friends.

Rusty is part of the "Moving Out" Group Capstone Impact Project team, alongside fellow class members Pamela Williams, and Rachel Gaddy. The Moving Out Project is a prosperous non-profit organization with a mission of developing resources and tools for individuals with disabilities to be independent and self-sufficient.



**Visit My  
Facebook:**





# ELAINE CARNEY

*She/Her/Hers*

“

*There but for the grace of God go I.*

*- John Bradford, often quoted by Elaine's Aunt Lucille*

wanted to do something good for others. Elaine became an advocate at a young age when her younger brother was born with Down Syndrome. As he communicated non-verbally, Elaine helped him communicate with others to get what he needed.

Elaine's personal experience of growing up with disabilities was not pleasant. She was made fun of and called names. Thankfully, her family was incredibly supportive of her; they advocated for her needs before she was ready to do so herself, showing her the importance of standing up for herself and others.

When she was younger, Elaine was a camper at Camp Shriver. Others, including the camp's founder, Eunice Kennedy Shriver, recognized Elaine was ready to do more. Eunice asked Elaine to become a camp junior counselor, and she began working with others with special needs in activities including swimming, horseback riding, arts and crafts, basketball, and more. Elaine recalls being asked to be a junior counselor, and how wonderful it felt knowing that others looked up to her.

Elaine has enjoyed her Partners in Policymaking® experience, as she had the opportunity to learn how to be a stronger advocate for herself and others with disabilities as a continuation of her lifelong commitment to this community.

Elaine, with the help of other Partners in her Capstone Impact Project Group, focused on learning about a local institution and what steps need to be taken to shut it down.

# RACHEL COATES

*She/Her/Hers*



“—

*Only You Can Control Your Future.*

*- Dr. Seuss*

Rachel Coates is a resilient 26-year-old woman, living with a disability, who embodies determination and advocacy. She joined the Partners class alongside her mother, Kim.

Having been a Girl Scout and earning the prestigious Gold Award for her impactful work in supporting advocacy about 22q deletion syndrome, Rachel is no stranger to championing causes close to her heart. She is unwavering in the pursuit of personal growth and independence, actively engaging in college classes focused on life skills.

A passionate performer, Rachel finds joy and fulfillment as a member of ArtStream, an inclusive theater where she showcases her love for singing on stage. Committed to maintaining her health and well-being, she dedicates herself to weekly adaptive fitness classes, striving to become stronger both physically and as a self-advocate.

An avid animal lover and proud dog owner, Rachel generously devotes her time to volunteering at the local animal shelter, providing care and support to animals awaiting adoption. With a compassionate spirit and a drive to effect positive change, Rachel aspires to empower herself and others through advocacy and resilience.

Rachel and her classmates, Kim, Cristina, and Demetria, have partnered to work on their “Wider Lens: Beyond Playgrounds” Capstone Impact Project that explores the needs beyond our Inclusive Playground Frameworks to inclusive recreation. Inclusion in recreation extends beyond playgrounds for a community of wide needs, ages, and interests. Through community feedback and assessing the current landscape of what is available, they propose potential solutions for creating positive, inclusive recreation for all.



# JESSICA L. COOK

*She/Her/Hers*

“—

*If you want a thing done well, do it yourself.*

*- Napoleon Bonaparte*

Advisory Committee, and is a member of the Lower Shore Autism Community group. Jessica is a regular attendee of The Arc Maryland's Governmental Affairs Committee with hopes to propose legislation of her own.

As a single mom, Jessica was thrust into the disadvantaged world of disability. She experienced denials of assistance by several organizations due to not meeting criteria and standards for assistance: criteria that she believes was unjust and often times unfair. Because her children did not have behavioral issues or physical impairments (they had sensory behaviors), it often felt like she was fighting an uphill battle with getting needed help. She was determined to see her children thriving. She had her children's OT and PT teach her the techniques they used every two weeks, rather than just working with her children, and she continued to use of these techniques herself, daily, as they were truly needed. Jessica also learned Mirrored Speech Therapy, Vision Therapy, and Frequency/Music Therapy to properly provide for her children so they could be successful. She became a certified teacher to home school them due to abuse and neglect in multiple school systems. She also recently completed certification as a Care Provider through MAC Inc., which included Alzheimer's & Dementia Training, Dementia Live Caregiver Training, AGE-u-cate, and CPR certification.

Jessica's twins are now 14 years old, and Benjamin, who was previously diagnosed as non-verbal, is now on his 24th language and has his own YouTube channel. Nicholas, who was taught to stamp his name in public school, is now writing cursive beautifully. Both are thriving and living their best lives.

For her Capstone Impact Project, Jessica has partnered with Elizabeth, Ulric, and Gretchen. They are working on recommendations to strengthen the Ethan Saylor Alliance and are in the process of developing a framework with resources and suggestions for the next Partners cohort and IDD organizations to implement in the future.

# CRISTINA J. EASTON

*She/Her/Hers*

“—

*Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot,  
nothing is going to get better, it's not.*

*- Dr. Seuss*

Cristina Jacobs Easton is the founder and CEO of imPACT Educational Consulting. She majored in Sociology at Smith College, earned her Master's in Teaching as a New York City Teaching Fellow in Special Education, and her Master's in Education Leadership at Bank Street College of Education.



After being a founding staff member and Assistant Principal at The Young Women's Leadership School of Brooklyn, Cristina returned to her hometown of Baltimore as Upper School Principal at Baltimore Leadership School for Young Women. There, she worked to increase student choice in coursework, including the expansion of the Advanced Placement program, work-study opportunities, and increasing arts course options.

In 2020, Cristina started her consulting company, through which she works with schools, school leaders, and educators, from elementary to college in developing programming that enhances student voice and leadership, particularly for urban girls and girls of color, and neurodiverse students. Cristina is also the Program Manager at AdoptAClassroom.org; an education crowdfunding site, where she builds programs that center around teacher expertise and support equity in education funding.

In 2021, Cristina and her husband learned that their son has autism. This catapulted their family into autism acceptance and family advocacy. Together, they founded the Embrace Play playgroup for families of neurodivergent children ages birth to ten. Through Embrace, the Eastons provide spaces for families to enjoy where their children and their needs and gifts are validated, and where families can learn from and lean on one another. In all that she does professionally and personally, Cristina is driven by the principles of equity and joy.

Cristina, along with Kim, Rachel, and Demetria, have partnered to work on their "Wider Lens: Beyond Playgrounds" Capstone Impact Project that explores the needs beyond our Inclusive Playground Frameworks to inclusive recreation. Inclusion in recreation extends beyond playgrounds for a community of wide needs, ages, and interests. Through community feedback and assessing the current landscape of what is available, they propose potential solutions for creating positive inclusive recreation for all.

**About My  
Consulting:**





# ULRIC ERICKSON

*They/Them/Theirs*

“  
*Fall down seven times, get up eight times.*

*- Japanese proverb*

Ulric is a self-advocate with a disability. They were born in Jacksonville, Florida. Ulric is working towards a Political Science degree at Montgomery College, working on their last credit before graduating.

People's rights, especially disability rights across the board, are significantly important to Ulric. Through their own hardship of being placed in general education without receiving the services needed, they were inspired to do something about it and provide assistance to others who were facing the same challenges as them.

Ulric participated in Court Watch in Montgomery County in 2020, and in Washington D.C. in 2022. Ulric currently volunteers with the Jail Support in Montgomery County, providing assistance and support to individuals who are currently in and out of the jail system. They enjoy working as a Security Officer at Contemporary Services Corporation in the DMV area. During free time, Ulric enjoys playing soccer and watching football.

Ulric is grateful for their participation in the Maryland Partners in Policymaking® program and says their advocacy skills have grown since joining the first session and learning more about the legislative session this year.

Ulric has partnered with classmates Jessica, Gretchen, and Elizabeth to work on recommendations for strengthening the work of the Ethan Saylor Alliance for their Group Capstone Impact Project. They are in the process of developing a framework with resources and recommendations for the next Partners cohort and IDD organizations to hopefully implement in the future.

# KARI FISHER

*She/Her/Hers*



“  
*If you are going through hell, keep going.*

- Winston S. Churchill

Kari has been a practicing attorney since 2000 and has spent her career in the public sector. She moved to College Park in 2000 after graduating from law school. She is an alumnus of New York University (twice), the University of Miami, and Georgetown University. Kari has two incredible children; one is almost 20, and the other is entering his senior year of high school. Her eldest child has numerous disabilities and, after years of failure and gross mistreatment by the public school system, was unlawfully issued a high school diploma at the age of 17, even though Kari and her daughter fought against it.

Kari continues to advocate for her daughter with the local school system and various agencies and public officials in Maryland, including in judicial proceedings, as she maintains that her daughter has not received educational or other services to date through the school system, DDA, and DORS, even though she is entitled to an education through age 22. Kari believes that part of the global problem is a lack of legal services and expertise in this area for individuals with IDD through age 22 and that school systems spend unchecked, unlimited funds on private external attorneys to stifle the efforts of families who try to assert their rights. Many families cannot afford attorneys and must advocate on their own.

Kari would like to see a requirement for all Maryland school systems to disclose annual spending on private attorneys in all matters and that, eventually, all school systems banned from hiring external private attorneys.

Kari's Capstone Impact Project focused on the shortage of legal services and expertise in Maryland for individuals with IDD from birth to 22, particularly under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). She sought to create opportunities for individuals with IDD to intern at law firms, government agencies practicing law, and non-profits that provide legal services to bring the legal community closer to her daughter's community.

Kari spoke to TerpsEXCEED about creating partnerships in the legal community and at the University of Maryland toward this goal. She also reached out to lawmakers about potential legislation to require Maryland law schools to create and offer coursework in the IDEA and other impactful areas of law, particularly through age 22, and create law school clinics that help families with IDEA cases and related areas of law, like Medicaid, Title IX, and Section 504 discrimination.

# OPAL FOSTER

*She/Her/Hers*

“—  
| *Your legacy is every life you have ever touched.*

- *Maya Angelou*

Opal Foster brings extensive experience in the disability community, having been a Communications Specialist for Prince George’s County PODS and a Program Coordinator for the Down Syndrome Network of Montgomery County, Maryland. At the American Institutes for Research (AIR), she served as Vice

President of AccessAIR, promoting inclusiveness for people with disabilities. Opal has also worked as a Fine Arts educator at Takoma Academy, a paraeducator for Montgomery County Public Schools, and an instructor for Creative Development Studios, an afterschool enrichment program in inner-city Baltimore.

Opal’s proudest accomplishment is raising her son Jeremiah, who has Down syndrome. Jeremiah is a vibrant 16-year-old who enjoys bocce, basketball, music, and art. Currently, Jeremiah is working as a Walgreens stockperson through his high school’s work-study program and is enrolled in a class to further his career as a chef. Jeremiah had a role in his school’s play, *Amélie*, and aspires to be famous one day.

Opal and Jeremiah were featured on CNN’s *New Day* and *ABC News Live* for their experience during the COVID crisis. Opal credits her resilience and optimistic outlook to her faith. Through her various roles and her dedication to the disability community, Opal hopes to continue this much-needed work.

Opal’s Group Capstone Impact Project is the development of “Exceptionally Able, Inc.”, a comprehensive online platform offering a range of resources tailored to differently-abled individuals, caregivers, and service providers. From support networks to specialized providers, it serves as a one-stop destination supporting those navigating the intricacies of exceptional care with vital support and guidance.

**Visit My  
Website:**





# CARLA FUENZALIDA

*She/Her/Hers*



“

*In the most difficult moments, we are given an opportunity to reset and determine who we are or want to be. You alone shape your life.*

*- Carla Fuenzalida*

Carla Fuenzalida was born in Peru and has lived in Maryland since 2002. She is the mother of three children, Gabe, Mia, and Kiara. Carla works at CLCA, an autism waiver agency, as a Self-Directed IISS Worker. She previously worked at the Monocacy Neurodevelopmental Center as an IISS Assistant. Carla's favorite thing to do is cooking; She received her Culinary School Certification from the ServSafe® Program. She also loves animals and is very passionate about protecting animals' rights.

When Gabe, was diagnosed with autism at the age of two, Carla, who considers herself a “mamma bear,” was motivated to begin her disability advocacy to support her family. She also created her own mechanism of defense, or “immune system” as she calls it, to overcome life's greatest challenges. Carla believes there is no strength without struggle, even during her most difficult times. When her son was diagnosed, she took a deep breath and told Gabe, *“It is what it is, don't be afraid. I'm here for you, I'll be your voice, I'll fight for your rights, I'll always hold your hand, and I'll walk by your side in our journey.”*

Carla uses her “immune system” as an everyday tool for her family. She uses her courage against any fear, bravery against adversity, wisdom against the world's ignorance, resilience to move forward, and gratitude to God for choosing her to be Gabe's mom. Carla continues to support her son to overcome new challenges. Gabe learns new skills every day, like cooking, building furniture, and doing chores at home; He is becoming more independent and has a lot of self-confidence.

Carla is currently pursuing her degree at Frederick Community College, where she is also learning American Sign Language. She plans to transfer to the University of Maryland with a major in Social Service and a minor in Public Health. One day, Carla hopes to become a Delegate to work for her community and be more involved in the needs of people with special needs; she wants to help more kids and families like hers, and children just like Gabe.

Carla, and her Capstone Impact Project Group, are working on a vision of inclusive and affordable living, for young adults and adults with disabilities, to find the best way to get affordable living and housing programs through grants and government funds to make living for people with disabilities more affordable and to meet all their needs.



# RACHEL SABRINA GADDY

*She/Her/Hers*

“  
| *I can do all things through Christ who  
strengthens me.*

*- Philippians 4:13*

Rachel Sabrina Gaddy was born and raised in East Baltimore, but has resided in Harford County for almost two decades. She is an only child, a devoted wife, a proud mother of four children, and a Nana of seven beautiful grandbabies.

Sabrina has always been passionate about helping people; she knew she wanted to have a career focused on helping people in some capacity. She worked at a number of great organizations that provided various services to people. After discovering her granddaughter was autistic, Sabrina knew her greater mission was in advocacy.

Sabrina is the President/CEO of Mothers Against Staying Silent (MASS), a non-profit organization that she launched in 2020. The mission of the organization is to heighten awareness in the community and provide support, advocacy, and resources to victims of sexual abuse.

Anyone who knows Sabrina knows she is a very caring, giving & loving person with a very big heart. She plans to take her advocacy to a whole new level after graduating from Maryland's Partners in Policymaking® Program.

For her Capstone, Sabrina is part of the “Moving Out Project”, alongside fellow class members Pamela Williams and Rusty Buchanan. The Moving Out Project will be a non-profit organization with a mission of assisting individuals with disabilities with every step of getting/being prepared to live on their own. The organization will assist with resources for furniture, counseling, other services, and advocacy.

**Visit the MASS  
Facebook:**



# GRETCHEN B. GILLESPIE

*She/Her/Hers*



“  
*Begin by presuming competence.*  
- Douglas Biklen

Gretchen Gillespie’s advocacy journey began when her son, Oliver, was diagnosed with a rare Chromosome microdeletion at age 18 months. Oliver is mostly nonspeaking. Thanks to Infants and Toddlers and their local school system, Oliver was introduced to augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) at a young age. His first communication device consisted of just two buttons; Oliver used this device at therapeutic horseback riding to tell his horse to “Whoa” or “Walk on.” 18 years later, Oliver now uses a sophisticated, 80 buttons-per-page communication app: TouchChat with WordPower. He can construct sentences up to 13 words in length. This is Oliver’s “voice.”

Historically, there have been low literacy expectations for children with disabilities. Gretchen is a strong proponent that students who are nonspeaking or have IDD can learn to read. Unfortunately, “presumed incompetence” permeated one of Oliver’s school placements; he was perceived as unable to read, count, communicate, behave, or work in the community. Oliver was not even allowed to use the bathroom alone; he was on a pipeline to a sheltered workshop, which would never suit his effervescent personality.

Those low expectations led Gretchen to create an after-school program for Oliver, where his learning took off; he can read, count, communicate, behave, and work in the community! Oliver also transferred to a wonderful school where they presume competence. Gretchen has advocated for Oliver’s medical needs with the Maryland Insurance Administration. She has advocated for Oliver with MSDE, the DOJ, Child and Adult Protective Services, the Maryland Department of Health, and the Office of Health Care Quality. She is grateful for all the support Oliver has received from these organizations.

Gretchen joined Partners to learn to be a more effective advocate and learn about laws that affect her son and other people with disabilities. She graduated with a degree in civil engineering from the University of Maryland and worked for 25 years in engineering and construction, which gave her the opportunity to work and live abroad in London and Cairo. Gretchen and her husband, Andrew, are the proud parents of two amazing adult sons, James and Oliver.

Gretchen partnered with classmates Ulric, Jessica, and Elizabeth to work on the Ethan Saylor Alliance for their Group Capstone Impact Project, where they are in the process of developing a framework with resources and recommendations for the next Partners in Policymaking® cohort and Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities organizations to implement.

**Visit My LinkedIn:**



# CHIQUITA HUTTON

*She/Her/Hers*

“

*Having a child with special needs challenges you to love unconditionally and find strength you never knew you had.*

*- Robert M. Hensel*

Chiquita Hutton, a resident of Prince George's County, has called Maryland home since 1992. She is a dedicated mother to her 11-year-old daughter, Sydney, who was diagnosed with spastic quadriplegia cerebral palsy, epilepsy, global developmental delay, hydrocephalus, and encephalopathy during the first three years of her life.

Chiquita has spent countless hours researching medical journals, attending conferences, and connecting with other parents in similar situations. She became a fierce advocate for her daughter, pushing for the best possible care, treatments, and support which led her to join Partners. With the support and guidance of the program, along with her dedication and determination, Chiquita has empowered herself with the knowledge and skills needed to navigate the complex world of healthcare services and programs to ensure her daughter receives the care she deserves. Chiquita's unwavering commitment to advocating for her daughter serves as an inspiration to others facing similar challenges.

Chiquita and her daughter have authored and published two books: “Sydney’s Superpowers” and “A Surgery Guide for Your Kiddo: Navigating the Journey as a Caregiver of a Differently Able Child.” These books are just the beginning, as the family plans to release more series to raise awareness for children with disabilities. They firmly believe that by shedding light on the diverse experiences of differently-abled individuals, the world will become more inclusive. They hope that children will not feel pressured to conform to be accepted. By sharing their personal experiences and insights, Chiquita and her daughter hope to provide support and guidance for caregivers, educate the public about the unique challenges and strengths of differently-abled individuals, and promote inclusivity and acceptance in society.

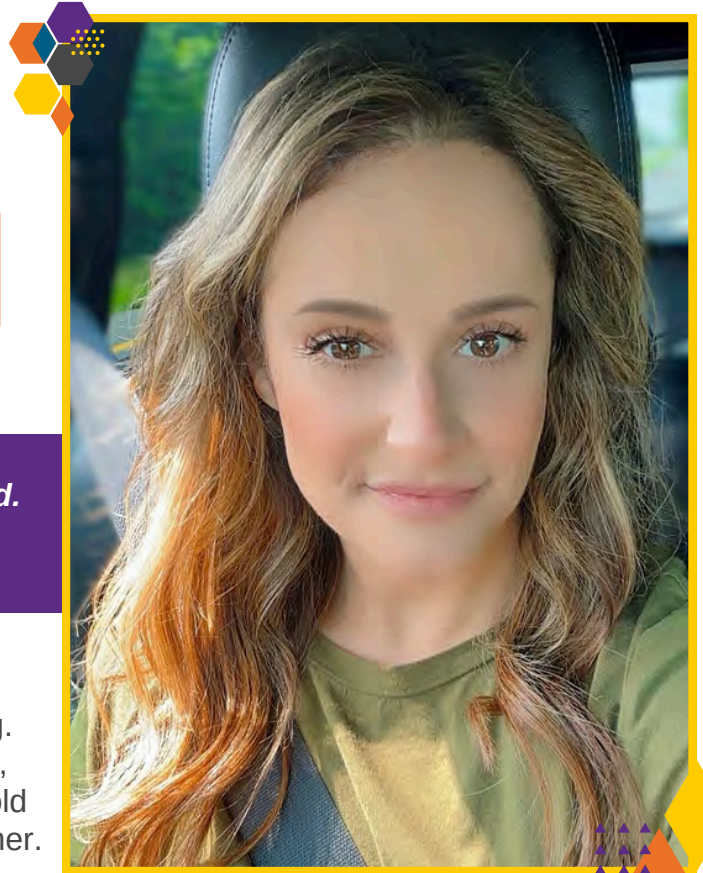
Chiquita's Group Capstone Impact Project is the development of Exceptionally Able, Inc.: a comprehensive online platform offering a range of resources tailored to differently-abled individuals, caregivers, and service providers. From support networks to specialized providers, it serves as a one-stop destination to support those navigating the intricacies of exceptional care with vital support and guidance.

**Check Out Our Books:**



# JESSICA JOHNSON

*She/Her/Hers*



“ —  
*You must be the change you wish to see in the world.*

- Mahatma Gandhi

Jessica Johnson was born and raised in Montgomery County. She attended Towson University where she received a business degree with a certificate in marketing. Today, Jessica lives in Olney with her husband, Marques, and her 5-year-old son Kai. Jessica also has a 13-year-old "bonus" daughter, Rylan, who lives with them each summer.

At age two, Kai was diagnosed with an ultra-rare genetic neurological condition called Syngap1. At the time Kai was diagnosed, a little over 300 individuals had been diagnosed with Syngap1 worldwide. Today 1,400 individuals across the globe have been diagnosed, with the number growing each week.

Before Kai's diagnosis, Jessica worked as a program specialist at the National Institutes of Health (NIH), first in the Office of Research for Women's Health, and then for the National Heart, Blood, and Lung Institute. Each February, Jessica enjoys returning to NIH's campus to participate in Rare Disease Day. To dedicate the time and attention Kai needed, Jessica, with the support of her husband, took a step away from full-time employment. Jessica also keeps busy volunteering for Syngap Research Fund (SRF), her Syngap1 parent advocacy group. Volunteering with SRF allowed Jessica to advocate on Capitol Hill for Rare Disease Week, where she was honored to be selected as one of three advocates to speak in front of United States Senator Chris Van Hollen about Syngap1 and how a rare disease has impacted her family.

Jessica has also dedicated a lot of her time to learning American Sign Language (ASL). While she initially learned ASL to provide an additional way for her son to communicate, Jessica quickly fell in love with the language and hopes to continue to an interpreting program next year. Now that Kai is in a full-day Kindergarten program through MCPS, Jessica looks forward to rejoining the workforce. Like many of her fellow Partners, Jessica hopes to use the experience and knowledge gained from the program to make our world more accepting and accessible to all people.

Jessica teamed up with Jareese, Chiquita, and Opal for her Group Capstone Impact Project. They share the lived experience of being mothers of children who are differently-abled. They are excited to create their website - Exceptionally Able, Inc., a comprehensive online platform offering a range of resources tailored to differently-abled individuals, caregivers, and service providers. From support networks to specialized providers, it serves as a one-stop destination supporting those navigating the intricacies of exceptional care with vital support and guidance.

**Visit My  
LinkedIn:**





# CRYSTAL JOY JONES

*She/Her/Hers*

“—  
*Sometimes the fear won't go away, so  
you'll have to do it afraid.*

*- Tracy A Malone*

Crystal Joy Jones is the proud aunt, and mother of four wonderful children, who have various disabilities. She has a background in Pre-K education and has worked with children in many different age groups. Crystal has always wanted to give every child she worked with a sense of acceptance and belonging.

Throughout her journey with disability services, Crystal has met many amazing community members who are thrilled to continue pushing and working with her for a quality of life and opportunities for all children and relatives. She believes that everyone has a wonderful heart and that we all belong.

Crystal has completed the Family Leadership Program with the Maryland Coalition of Families and participated in various support groups in Prince George's County. She wants to thank everyone involved for their dedication to keeping the fight alive! After graduating from the Maryland Partners in Policymaking® program, Crystal will continue to learn and advocate for people whose voices may be overlooked.

Crystal is completing a Capstone Impact Project alongside group members. The project works on care programs available for those with special needs as they age out of traditional child care and locate overall care that meets their needs.

# MEGHAN KONKA

*She/Her/Hers*



“  
*Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better.*

- Maya Angelou

Meghan was born and raised in Baltimore, where she lives with her husband and two sons. She is a Finance Analyst and a passionate advocate for people's rights. Meghan had her firstborn son, Jayden, at a young age. Motherhood helped her find her purpose in life. She returned to school while working full-time and taking care of her son. Her dedication and motivation helped her overcome the difficult challenges she endured with her son.

When Jayden was four, Meghan found her true love and got married. Her husband took Jayden in as his child and has been a great role model for him. In 2018, the family welcomed Junior. It was a different birth experience for Meghan, and, as Junior grew, she noticed the lack of eye contact while feeding him. Meghan focused on early intervention with private therapy at her home. Junior was formally diagnosed with Autism, Global Developmental delays, PICA sensory processing disorder, and feeding disorder in January of 2020.

Meghan has advocated for her son, who is non-speaking, all his life. She continues to advocate for parents who struggle to receive support from their healthcare network or school system. She believes that if you see something, you need to say something, especially for individuals with IDD. Meghan advocated during the 2024 Legislative Session, providing testimony in the Senate to pass the Access to Attorneys, Advocates, and Consultants for Special Education Program and Fund Bill. This law provides access to advocates, consultants, and attorneys for the special education program. It not only gives access to support the needs of parents and caregivers but also reduces the number of families that request mediation because they will have someone with the right expertise providing legal counsel guidance and support through the special education process.

Meghan joined Partners to continue her education and help her son and other families. She is proud to be part of the movement and create a world where Junior and other people with IDD are free to be themselves and are not overlooked and undervalued as human beings and integral members of society.

Meghan's Group Capstone Impact Project focuses on increasing meaningful inclusion in neighborhood schools, including the expansion of Best Buddies programs, and other initiatives that promote connection and belonging of all students.

# STACY LURIE

*She/Her/Hers*

“

*If one is lucky, a solitary fantasy can totally transform one million realities.*

*- Maya Angelou*

Stacy Lurie is a sibling of multiple individuals of varying abilities. Having been adopted from Ibague, Columbia, by two parents who adopted children of varying ability from underserved

communities in Latin America, Stacy decided to dedicate her career to the advancement of individuals with disabilities. Throughout Stacy's 20-year leadership career, she has worked for both local and national organizations, developing a broad level of experience in successful oversight of disability support services. This includes recreational services, a parent support network, an employment department, a volunteer engagement platform, a shared living department, personal support services, and a behavior intervention unit.

Currently, Stacy is a consultant specializing in building inclusive programs in the Jewish Community. She works collaboratively with stakeholders from various Jewish agencies to build cutting-edge services and embeds equity and belonging. She writes necessary policies, program budgets, and resources for fundraising.

For Stacy's Group Capstone Impact Project, she helped build a "road map" for schools to become more inclusive. Stacy focused on utilizing existing state/national programs and making them more accessible for schools to implement. This was done through creating a plan to bring more extra-curricular organizations that support inclusion into schools. In addition, a resource of existing programs that support inclusion in various Maryland counties was created. This will help various Special Education Citizens' Advisory Committees (SECAC) find existing programs.



# DEMETRIA MARSHALL -LEONARD

*She/Her/Hers*



“—  
| *Normal isn't really my thing.*  
- Demetria Marshall-Leonard

Demetria Marshall-Leonard is a self-advocate with autism, a condition that she says may not be immediately apparent to others. Her awareness of this aspect of herself only emerged at the age of 41, during her research on autism for her grandson, Davin. This realization has brought to light the challenges she has faced, including feeling misunderstood, struggling with social interactions, and finding it difficult to adapt to traditional educational settings.

Demetria is grateful for the opportunity to participate in the Maryland Partners in Policymaking® program since it has illuminated the plight of individuals who are often overlooked due to inadequate screening for learning and developmental disabilities. This recognition brought her to tears as she learned about the unfortunate outcomes faced by many individuals with IDD, such as incarceration or lifelong struggles. She believes that while we cannot change the past, we can strive for progress by advocating for the implementation of adult learning disability programs and inclusive recreational activities in Maryland for all individuals with disabilities. Cultivating social skills is essential in today's society, and she is enthusiastic about championing this important cause.

For her Capstone Impact Project, Demetria partnered with class members Cristina, Kim, and Rachel to concentrate on inclusive recreation, a project that has held a special place in her heart for the past five years. Through the project, the group has collected essential data through a survey. This data will help raise awareness about the importance of inclusive recreation spaces, both indoors and outdoors in Maryland.

**Visit My Shop:**

A square QR code with a white background and a blue border, located in the bottom right corner of the page. Above the QR code is the text "Visit My Shop:" in white on a dark blue background.



# DAVE MCCORMACK

*He/Him/His*

“

*If you build it, they will come.*

*- Field of Dreams*

Dave McCormack lives in Montgomery County. He loves listening to music; it is one of his biggest passions; so much so that he is fondly known as "DJ Dave The Situation!" Dave's favorite genre of music is alternative, but he enjoys a wide collection. Dave also loves all sports, and he enjoys working in Best Buy warehouse, where he handles shipments. David was born in Brazil, adopted at the age of five, and brought to the United States. He grew up in Cleveland, Ohio, and moved to Maryland when at 10 years old.

Advocacy is an important part of David's life, and he is honored to help other people with disabilities. Dave knows it is wrong to ignore people with disabilities, and he feels it is important to step up and advocate for change. Dave has gone to Annapolis to speak with legislators on what help we need from our policymakers. In the past, Dave has experienced people not giving him a chance, so he wants to make sure that others are noticed, have their voices heard, and live the lives they want.

Dave's personal experiences influenced his advocacy work and inspired his passion for transportation equity. He knows first-hand the frustrations of using the limited and inconsistent services of metro access. He is also an active member of the Maryland Jubilee's Client Council, a self-advocacy group. Being a Client Council member gives Dave a great opportunity to hear the voices of other Jubilee participants, and they advocate together to receive the services they want from Jubilee.

Dave's Capstone Impact Project, along with classmates, focused on affordable housing in Maryland. The group interviewed different people and got their perspectives on housing management and DDA funding around the state to improve availability and cost for people on need.

# REBECCA MESTAS

*She/Her/Hers*

*Expectations Matter. Expect Ability.*

- Laura Hatcher

Rebecca “Becka” Mestas is a Howard County native, spouse to a military veteran, and mother of two amazing children, Arianna, 13, and Samuel, 8. Becka began her journey with the disability community in middle school when she was selected to visit the Cedar Lane School throughout the school year. Through her engagement and involvement with these students, Becka gained an understanding of students' perspectives, strengths, and challenges. Later in life, Becka's daughter was diagnosed with autism and ADHD.

She has since advocated to support her daughter's needs and obtain the services she requires to be as successful as her neurotypical peers.

Over the years, Becka developed relationships with other parents and noticed shared challenges they faced when navigating the school system with a neurodivergent child. She also developed a passion for ensuring all students are given opportunities to succeed and thrive. With her daughter's permission, Becka began open discussions with the community on the challenges her daughter and family faced. As a result, Becka has supported dozens of local families, lent a non-judgmental ear, and assisted them in navigating the process of advocating for their children. Furthermore, Becka realized there was a gap in social opportunities for neurodivergent teens, and as a result, began a monthly teen meet-up group where teens can play games, develop friendships, and navigate social situations, all while parents build their support network with parents in similar situations.

Through her research and advocacy experiences, Becka learned and had the privilege to join Partners. She hopes that the knowledge she has gained and the amazing group of individuals she has come to know will help her grow and advance her advocacy efforts to ensure everyone leads fulfilling, self-directed, and supported lives. She thanks Coni and Ande for a wonderful year of growth, guidance, and learning. She also thanks her classmates for providing a wide range of backgrounds and experiences. Finally, she thanks her family for their love and unwavering support throughout the journey.

Becka is part of “Team Holly” Capstone Impact Project Group. She researched the history of state-run institutions and the barriers surrounding the closing of facilities like The Holly Center in Salisbury. They interviewed members of People On the Go Maryland's leadership who support the closing of state-run facilities for people with IDD. Her group had an opportunity to visit The Holly Center, meet with staff and residents, and speak with families of individuals residing there. For their final project, they developed and distributed a short video identifying the environment around closing residential facilities like The Holly Center.





# DR. RICHARD LEON RILEY

*He/Him/His*

“*Life is short. Do not forget about the most important things in our life: living for other people and doing good for them.*

*- Marcus Aurelius, Meditations*

Dr. Riley (Rick) was born in Texas, lived in Oklahoma, raised in New England, and served in the United States Air Force (active duty) for 10 years. He completed his Ph.D. in Occupational Health and Safety at Capitol Technology University in Laurel, and attended Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health for doctoral research, as well as Harvard Business School Online for postdoc education. He works as an executive head of global health, safety, and environment in the life sciences industry.

Rick found his lifelong passion for special needs advocacy through a spark lit by his oldest daughter, Alexis, who was diagnosed with Williams Syndrome (WS) at 18 months. Alexis was born in Tokyo, Japan, presenting cardiovascular concerns and developmental delays as an infant. Follow-up at Rady Children's Hospital in San Diego delivered the formal diagnoses of WS.

Since Alexis's diagnosis, Rick has focused on a wide range of special needs supports and special education topics such as: WS health and development research, educational strategies, special education rights, governing laws, IEP protocol, state testing requirements, and comprehensive educational advocacy. Rick maintains involvement at Crofton Middle School as the Vice President of the PTA, where he focuses on special needs awareness, community involvement, and volunteerism. Rick is also the Chair of the Anne Arundel County Special Education Citizens Advisory Committee (SECAC).

Rick, his wife Ewelina, and their daughters Alexis and Alivia reside in Gambrills. They enjoy exploring nature walks and farms, adventuring around MD, VA, and other states/regions, catching sports events, attending performing arts, and trying a variety of restaurants; sushi is number one in the household. They also enjoy attending Athletes Serving Athletes events and running local races. Rick most recently completed the 128th Boston Marathon and raised money for disabled Post 9/11 veterans, running on behalf of Homes For Our Troops.

Rick, along with his classmates Stacy, Meghan, Katie, and Ani, is working on their Group Capstone Impact Project aimed at increasing meaningful inclusion in neighborhood schools. They are developing a roadmap with resources and recommendations for schools to implement. This project will assist various Special Education Citizens' Advisory Committees (SECAC) in Maryland in identifying existing programs.

**About Williams Syndrome:**



# KIM SCHOFIELD

*She/Her/Hers*



“  
*Today you are you, that is truer than true. There is no one alive who is you-er than you.*

- Dr. Seuss

Kim Schofield is a dedicated parent and advocate for individuals with disabilities, leveraging her experiences and passions to effect positive change in her community. From the moment her daughter was born, Kim embraced the role of advocate, tirelessly advocating for her daughter's needs and rights.

As a former Girl Scout leader, Kim mentored and inspired numerous young women, guiding them through their formative years. Her leadership was instrumental in two of her scouts, including her daughter, earning the prestigious Gold Award, a testament to her commitment to nurturing and empowering others.

With a wealth of experience leading various organizations dating back to her college years, Kim has a natural talent for leadership and community engagement. This early exposure to leadership roles has shaped her approach to visibility and advocacy, empowering others to be seen and heard.

Kim currently serves on the board of a nonprofit in the DMV region dedicated to supporting the IDD community. She is also the Executive Director at The Spirit Club Foundation. In this role, she spearheads initiatives to ensure individuals with disabilities have access to fitness and wellness programs, providing scholarship funds to alleviate financial barriers.

A firm believer in the power of networking and collaboration, Kim fosters partnerships to amplify impact and advance shared missions. Residing in Montgomery Village with her husband, daughter, and mother, Kim's commitment to creating inclusive communities shines through in her personal and professional endeavors.

Kim's Capstone Impact Project, done alongside classmates Cristina, Demetria, and Rachel, explores the needs beyond what is addressed by the DDA Inclusive Playground Framework with regard to inclusive recreation. Recreation is more than playgrounds for a community of wide needs, ages, and interests. Through community feedback and assessing the current landscape of what is available, the group proposed potential solutions to go beyond the playground.



# JAREESE BEA- ANNA SHIRLEE, LT, USN, MSC

*She/Her/Hers*

“

*Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. Then you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus.*

*- Philippians 4:6-7 NLT*

Jareese Shirlee was born in Washington, D.C., but raised in Savannah and Augusta, Georgia. She found her way back to the DMV in 2017 through the Navy and is an active-duty Officer, serving as a Healthcare Administrator in the Medical Service Corps. Jareese has two sons, Tobias and Cameron, and a puppy daughter named CoCo Chanel. She loves the Lord, dancing, reading, and writing. Jareese also serves her community as a volunteer cheerleading coach. Her current passion projects are expanding her knowledge of advocacy, her fashion and self-care YouTube Channel, and finishing her second poetry book.

Jareese's oldest son, Tobias, affectionately known as TJ, was diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder and speech aphagia when he was three years old. When the diagnoses continued to come, her advocacy bloomed as she learned to navigate complex systems and to be her child's voice. The family's relocation to the DMV area when TJ was 13 presented a unique experience and only strengthened her spirit of advocacy. This move highlighted the stress that families may face during times of transition, not only for exceptional individuals but also for their caregivers and siblings. Jareese also desires to help caregivers focus on self-care and provide pointed support for siblings, like her younger son, Cameron, who have unique life experiences. These experiences led Jareese to be a part of an amazing group for her Capstone Impact Project. With Partners, Jareese hopes to take her advocacy to the next level and learn to turn a small idea into a big reality.

Jareese's Capstone Impact Project, along with group members Chiquita, Opal, and Jessica, is a one-stop website, the Exceptionally Able, Inc. The comprehensive online platform offers a range of resources tailored to differently-abled individuals, caregivers, and service providers. From support networks to specialized providers, it serves as a one-stop destination supporting those navigating the intricacies of exceptional care with vital support and guidance.

# PARISH DARSHAE' SMITH

*She/Her/Hers*

“  
If you talk to a man in a language he understands,  
that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his  
language, that goes to his heart.

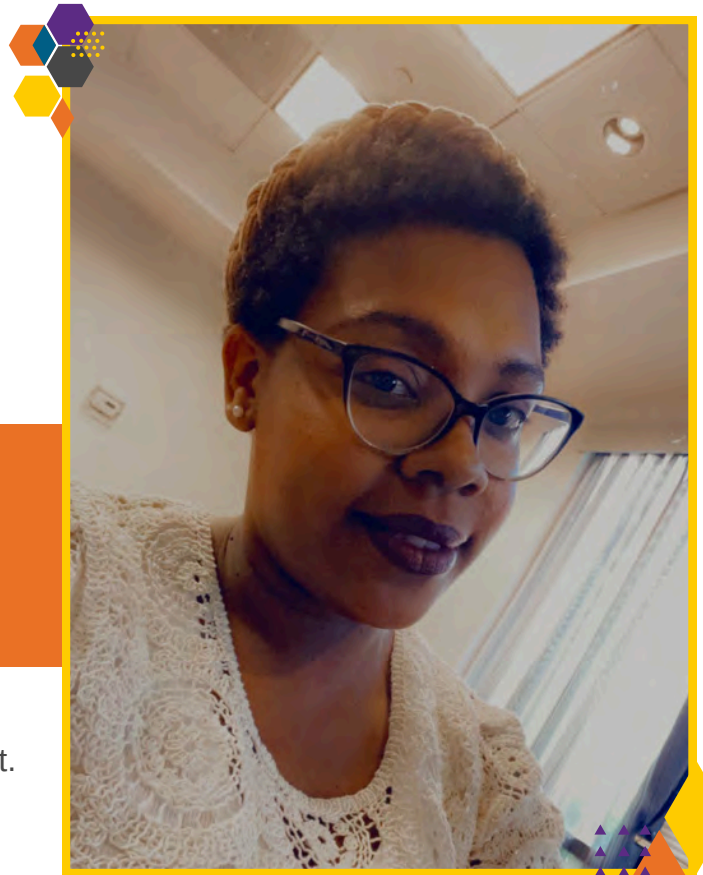
- Nelson Mandela

Parish Smith is a mom, student, and advocate. Born and raised in the D.C. Metro area, her family recently made St. Mary's County their home. Parish is an EMT wife and a busy stay-at-home mom of four - two boys and two girls.

Parish's work advocacy is to reform the current state of mental health and neurodivergent intervention practices for children of color. She aims to build, promote, and secure culturally competent early childhood intervention services for this population. The interventions for mental health and developmental challenges of Black and Brown children who reside in underserved communities are overwhelming. Economic disparities, culturally incompetent providers, miseducation, and racism have stricken these communities.

When her youngest son was not talking or playing with his siblings, Parish became concerned. Parish knew by 18 months that his development was behind; she spent hours reading to him and showing him how to mouth sounds to no avail. Unlike his siblings, there was little eye contact and more parallel play than actual engagement. Her son experienced extreme emotional changes, and she knew that more could be done for him. Without a formal diagnosis, her concerns were disregarded. Parish pushed to get him evaluated and begin services that helped and did not hinder him, and fought for providers who understood her culturally. She advocated to have his IEP developed, followed, and amended as needed. As a former Family Leadership Institute with Maryland Coalition of Families participant, Parish became empowered and knew that she was not alone and that there was hope along this journey. Parish knows the journey is just beginning, and she plans to advocate on behalf of her son and other people with IDD.

Parish and her Capstone Impact Project Group, "Team Holly," conducted a preliminary investigation on the political and community climate concerning the Holly Center Institute. Through their research on the history of Maryland State Institutions for people with developmental disabilities, interviews with People On the Go Maryland leadership, and a visit with the Holly Center Institution, the team developed a better understanding of present-day arguments for and against the closure of the Holy Institute. To highlight the advantages and disadvantages of the facility, Team Holly will share their findings and provide eclectic commentary via video format. The plan is to distribute the video to various advocacy groups via social media platforms and in their 2024 Capstone presentation during graduation.



# LEE ANNE SPEAR

*She/Her/Hers*



“

*No matter what anybody tells you, words and ideas can change the world.*

*- Robin Williams, Dead Poets Society*

Lee, Anne came to realize that she is also Neurodivergent. She spent her high school years volunteering in therapy and summer camp settings with children and teens with disabilities.

Lee Anne attended the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill for a Bachelors in History. It was during that time she found a way to combine her passion for teaching history with disability advocacy. Through a life-changing internship at the North Carolina Museum of Art, she decided to pursue a career in museum accessibility and education. Lee Anne moved to Washington, D.C. to study for a Masters in Museum Studies from George Washington University, and spent those years pursuing internships focused on museum accessibility and working in a local school system as a Special Education tutor and instructional assistant.

Upon graduation, Lee Anne began a full-time position with Baltimore's B&O Railroad Museum as the museum's Education Specialist for School and Sensory Programs. This position allowed Lee Anne to continue advocating for equitable access to cultural heritage, work directly with families and adults in the disability community, and take on a position as a leader in the world of museum accessibility programming. Participating in Partners has been an incredibly rewarding educational experience that has expanded her network of community members and support organizations in Maryland. As a new Baltimore resident, these connections will be invaluable to her moving forward, personally and professionally.

Lee Anne's Group Capstone Impact Project focused on afterschool and summer childcare programs available for children with disabilities at a variety of ages. By examining existing programs across Maryland and the broader United States and researching best practices, her group was able to create a guide for families and providers in the state.

**Visit My Website:**





# TANYA M. STEELE CLEMENTS

*She/Her/Hers*



“—  
*Today you are you, that is truer than true. There is no one alive who is you-er than you.*

- Dr. Seuss

Tanya M. Steele Clements was born in Landstuhl, Germany on the US Air Force Base. She has lived in several U.S. cities and states and visited several countries. She considers herself a World Citizen.

Tanya is a graduate of Florida A&M University, a historically black university, with a degree in Theatre and a minor in social work. Her life and work have been service, including as an AmeriCorps VISTA, Project Manager for City Year Detroit, Counselor/teacher and Director of Early Intervention/Prevention Services with ECKERD, Volunteer Coordinator with the Anne Arundel County Department of Social Services, and, for the past six years, their Division Director for Community Initiatives & Programs.

Tanya is the wife of a retired Navy Corpsman and mother of two beautiful children. Her 8-year-old son, Fabian who is amazing, was diagnosed with Down Syndrome before birth and Autism a few years ago. He received services from The Arc Central Chesapeake Region, Kennedy Krieger, Walter Reed Military National Medical Center, and many more providers. Fabian has an infectious smile and is a bright light to all who meet him. He has had six surgeries and has been sedated countless times. After he finally learned how to walk, and then run without falling, he is now hard to keep up with! Fabian is involved in Special Olympics sports.

Tanya was a lifeguard and loves to swim, so both her kids have been in the water since they were infants. She enjoys spending time with her family at the beach every summer. Tanya joined Partners to continue to make a difference in her son's life, advocating on his behalf every day.

Tanya's Group Capstone Impact Project is to research Meaningful Afterschool Initiatives in the hopes that they will be able to create a Statewide resource for families and providers.



# ELIZABETH TOTAH

*She/Her/Hers*

“—

*Friendship is unnecessary, like philosophy, like art.... It has no survival value; rather it is one of those things which give value to survival.*

*- C.S. Lewis, The Four Loves*

Elizabeth Totah brings a diverse background and a passion for making a difference through out-of-the-box solutions aimed at being both efficient and high-quality.

Early in her business career, she developed an appreciation for analytical data, planning, and collaboration being used to overcome hurdles while embracing compliance and collaboration. Inspired by the educational experiences of her two gregarious sons, one with Trisomy 21 and Down syndrome, Elizabeth found herself delving into education and advocacy. Elizabeth has worked as a non-certified high school Special Education teacher and middle school English Language Arts teacher. Her sons have been enrolled at a variety of schools including Montessori, International, Dual Language Immersion, Catholic Boys, Great Books Curriculum, and mainstream public schools.

Balancing family life and many moves, including overseas postings, Elizabeth dedicated her spare time to a variety of volunteer and non-profit organizations, including the Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston Archdiocesan Disability Steering Committee, Down Syndrome Network of Montgomery County, and the many schools where her children have been enrolled. Having recently completed Fran Bowman's Orton-Gillingham's 60-hour Plus program, she anticipates the dyslexia certification exam. Currently, Elizabeth is working at GiGi's Playhouse in Annapolis.

Using the existing charter, Elizabeth, Ulric, Jessica, and Gretchen will produce a roadmap for the Ethan Saylor Alliance to guide the development and implementation of a strategic plan for their Group Capstone Impact Project.

# PAMELA WILLIAMS

*She/Her/Hers*



“  
| *Do the best you can until you know better.  
Then when you know better, do better.*

- Maya Angelou

Pamela is originally from St. Mary's, Georgia which is close to Jacksonville, Florida. She currently lives in Elkridge, which she has called home for over 20 years. She is the mother of two adult children, Lauryn, who is 24 years old, and Jonathan, who is 19 years old, and one grandson, Justyn, who is 18 months old. Pamela has been married for 25 years. One of her children, Jonathan, is on the autism spectrum and has ADHD and anxiety. Her son received his diagnosis in elementary school. As her family navigated this journey, they had to be advocates to get Jonathan the resources he needed. Her son graduated from high school with a high school diploma in 2023. Jonathan's high school diploma was a testament to all of the hard work he did and the support he received along the way to accomplish his goal. At this time, Pamela is working with her son as he transitions from high school into adulthood.

Pamela has been active in the Howard County School System for the past twenty years and has served in various leadership roles in the PTA, including serving as the Treasurer. Pamela has been involved with the Autism Society of Maryland for the past decade and has also served on their Board of Directors for the past two years. Outside of her board work, Pamela is active in their Education Advocacy Committee. Pamela is involved in additional organizations, including being an active member of her local sorority and a member of Celebration Church.

For her Group Capstone Impact Project, Pamela is part of the "Moving Out Project," a prosperous non-profit organization with a mission of developing resources and tools for individuals with disabilities to be independent and self-sufficient.



# KATIE YORK

*They/Them/Theirs*

“  
*Advocacy is not just a task for charismatic individuals or high-profile community organizers. Advocacy is for all of us; advocacy is a way of life. It is a natural response to the injustices and inequality in the world.*

- Alice Wong

Katie York is an educator, advocate, and community organizer. As an adult, Katie realized that they were Autistic and had ADHD. In 2022, Katie founded Harford County Neurodivergents, a peer-led community group for neurodivergent adults in Harford County. Through Harford County Neurodivergents and their Facebook page, The Distracted Autistic, Katie provides neurodiversity-affirming resources and education.

Katie works to advance the principles of equity and justice in all facets of their life. They are a proud board member of Upper Chesapeake Bay Pride Foundation and Habitat for Humanity Susquehanna, an appointed member of the Harford County Public School (HCPS) Parent/Career Action, Advocacy, and Advisory Committee, and actively participate in the HCPS Special Education Citizen Advisory Committee.

Professionally, Katie has worked in higher education administration for fifteen years. Katie is a co-chair for both their employer's Committee on LGTBQ+ Advocacy, Support, and Inclusion and Neurodiversity Unbound, a faculty/staff committee dedicated to raising awareness of neurodivergent-related issues and best practices. Katie also sits on the President's DEIB Advisory Council and Accessibility roundtable.

Katie holds a BA in sociology and is actively pursuing a graduate degree in disability services in higher education at CUNY. Katie, their teen Samara, and their husband Dan live in Edgewood, Maryland.

Katie, along with classmates Stacy, Meghan, Rick, and Ani, is working on their Group Capstone Impact Project to enhance meaningful inclusion in neighborhood schools. They are creating a roadmap with resources and recommendations for schools to implement. This project will support various Special Education Citizens' Advisory Committees (SECAC) in Maryland in identifying existing programs.

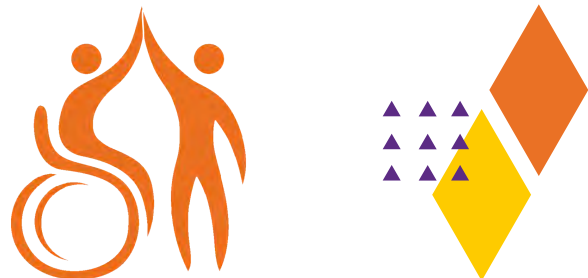
Visit My Website:



# Thank You to this Year's Facilitators & Presenters!

**Shawn Bateman**, AT Reuse & Access Coordinator, Maryland Technology Assistive Program (MDTAP)  
**Elisa Bayoumi**, Legislative Assistant for Congressman Dutch Ruppersberger  
**Anne Blackfield**, Deputy Secretary, Maryland Department of Disabilities  
**André Burno Coates**, Co-Founder & Executive Director, Maryland Community Connection  
**Meg Carter**, Vice President, Self-Directed Advocacy Network of Maryland Inc. (SDAN)  
**Guy Caruso Ph.D.**, FAAIDD; Western Coordinator, Institute on Disabilities at Temple University, Pennsylvania  
**Lily Chang**, Legislative Correspondent for Congressman John Sarbanes  
**Alexander Chanock**, Legislative Counsel for Congressman David Trone  
**Delegate Bonnie Cullison**, District 19, Montgomery County  
**Mark Dunham**, Principal, Kindred Strategies, Patuxent Commons  
**Denise Eblen**, Maryland Partner in Policymaking® Graduate  
**Megan Ford**, Visitors Program Coordinator, Maryland Department of Legislative Services  
**David Goldfarb**, Director of Long-Term Supports and Services Policy, The Arc US  
**Delegate Michelle Guyton**, District 42B, Baltimore County  
**Rochelle Harrod**, Prince George's County Independent Living Specialist, Independence Now  
**Brian Hart**, Chief Executive Officer, ShiftAbility  
**Laura Hatcher**, Disability Rights Advocate with Little Lobbyists  
**Chelsea Hayman**, Deputy Director, Maryland Department of Housing and Community Development  
**Congressman Glenn Ivey**  
**Hannah King**, Senior Legislative Assistant for Congressman Andy Harris  
**Catherine Kirk Robins**, Deputy Director, Maryland Citizens' Health Initiative  
**Ande Kolp**, Executive Director, The Arc Maryland  
**Delegate Pam Lanman Guzzone**, District 13, Howard County  
**Karen Lee**, Executive Director, SEEC  
**Rachel London, Esq.**, Executive Director, The Maryland Developmental Disabilities Council  
**Rachel Marshall**, Senior Counsel for Congressman Jamie Raskin  
**Senator Cory V. McCray**, District 45, Baltimore City  
**Michael McSheehan**, Owner, Evolve & Effect, LLC

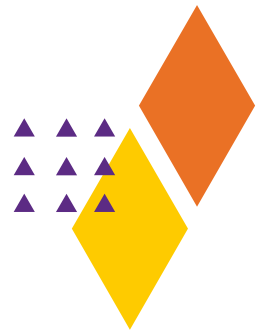
**Marilyn Morrison**, Director, Maryland Work Incentives Network (MD-WIN)  
**James Orman**, Program Coordinator, People On the Go Maryland  
**Tara Owens**, Deputy Director, Main Street  
**Michael Nagel**, Policy Manager, The Arc US  
**Sylvie Nguena Ouelega**, Maryland Partner in Policymaking® Graduate  
**Kristen Paul**, Director of Early Childhood Programs, The Parents' Place of Maryland  
**Eva Queen**, Founder/Executive Director, Community Advocates 4 You  
**Cathy Raggio**, Former Secretary, Maryland Department of Disabilities  
**Mat Rice**, Executive Director, People On the Go Maryland  
**Julie Ryan-Silva**, Director of Special Projects, Main Street  
**Patti Saylor**, Owner, Health Link LLC  
**Lauren Shores Shillinger**, Maryland Partner in Policymaking® Graduate  
**Lauren Silverstone**, Director of Housing Support Services, Maryland Inclusive Housing  
**Aaron Stephens**, Special Projects Director, The Arc of Frederick County  
**Guy Stephens**, Founder/Executive Director, Alliance Against Seclusion & Restraint  
**Carolyn Teigland, Ed.D.**, CEO, Maryland Coalition for Inclusive Education  
**Leslie E. Thompson**, MNM, BSW, Acting Director of Programs, Maryland Department of Health, Developmental Disabilities Administration  
**Hanna Vohra**, Health Legislative Assistant, U.S. Senator Chris Van Hollen  
**Marcus Whitman**, Maryland Partner in Policymaking® Graduate  
**Alexandra Wilcox**, Senior Legislative Assistant, U.S. Senator Chris Van Hollen  
**Lisa Wilson**, Maryland Partner in Policymaking® Graduate  
**Rhonda Workman**, Director of Federal Programs and Integrity, Maryland Department of Health, Developmental Disabilities Administration  
**Tracy Wright**, Director of Training, People On the Go Maryland  
**Senator Craig Zucker**, District 14, Montgomery County



*Special thanks to all the facilitators/presenters from The Arc Maryland Annual State Convention & Awards Banquet, and to all the members of the Maryland General Assembly who met with us during DD Day at the Legislature.*

# Class Autographs





## Contact Us

- 410-571-9320
- [www.TheArcMD.org](http://www.TheArcMD.org)
- [Info@TheArcMD.org](mailto:Info@TheArcMD.org)
- 8601 Robert Fulton Dr, Suite 140,  
Columbia, MD 21046

## Follow Us

- [www.Facebook.com/TheArcMD](http://www.Facebook.com/TheArcMD)  
[www.Facebook.com/TheArcMDEnEspañol](http://www.Facebook.com/TheArcMDEnEspañol)
- [@TheArcMD](https://twitter.com/TheArcMD)
- [linkedin.com/Company/The-Arc-Maryland](https://www.linkedin.com/company/the-arc-maryland)



Maryland Developmental  
Disabilities Council  
CREATING CHANGE • IMPROVING LIVES



*This project is supported by the Administration for Community Living (ACL), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) as part of a financial assistance award totaling \$1,265,982 with 100% funding by ACL/HHS. The contents are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official views of, nor an endorsement, by ACL/HHS, or the U.S. Government.*