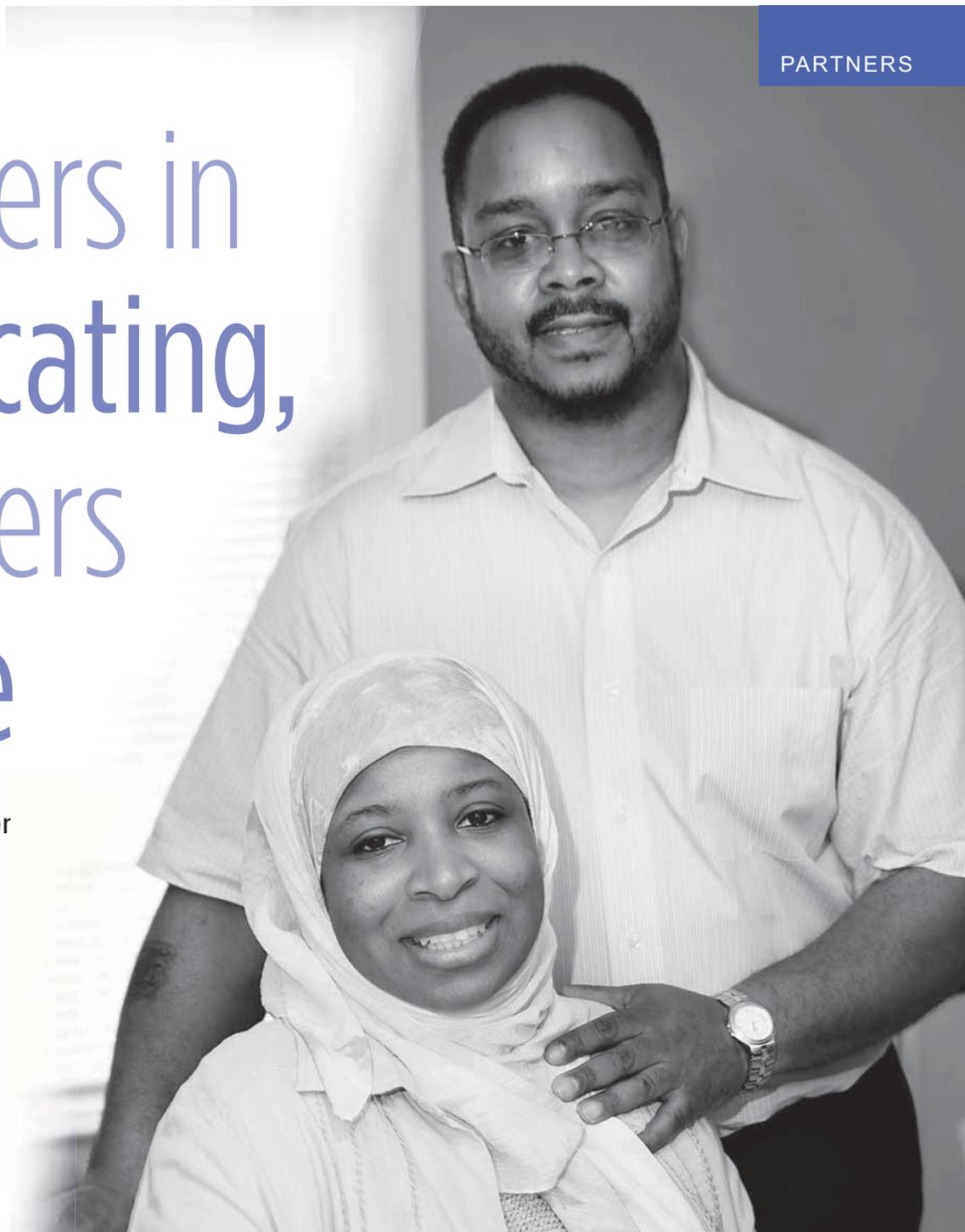


# Partners in Advocating, Partners in Life

by Maryann B. Hunsberger



**E**ric Smith and Safiyyah Muhammad of East Orange are not only partners in marriage, but also partners in advocacy. Muhammad attended Partners in Policymaking (PIP) in 2007, followed by Smith, who attended the leadership training program in 2008. The couple has five children between the ages of 6 and 21, including their son Sufyaan Muhammad, 10, who has autism.

Muhammad has been active with the State-wide Parent Advocacy Network and Autism NJ. She has developed a large network of parents, including a number of online connections.

The best source of networking that she found, however, has been PIP. “PIP taught me the importance of the power of networking. And it helped me understand policies and legislation.



**Sufyaan, their son, loves the computer.**

I've been doing a lot of networking; learning from others and passing that information on. Everywhere I go, I say "autism" and "disability" like the words are my first and middle name. I want people to learn more."

Smith attended PIP in 2008. He saw what his wife had gotten out of the experience and decided it was something he needed to do as well.

Smith had always concentrated more on working while his wife raised the children. A growing feeling of wanting to be more active in working with his son, Sufyaan, made him realize he needed to learn more.

"I found out that few men are involved in dealing with children with disabilities. This compelled me to take on the challenge. When I attended my wife's graduation from PIP, I knew I needed to do this. Other people needed to know about all the struggles that my son and other children with disabilities go through.

"At first, my son's issues drew me. But as I got more into it, I knew I needed to be involved for all people with disabilities." Before Partners, Smith knew very little about advocacy.

"I really didn't know how to advocate. But, at PIP's mock hearings, I learned that my voice can count. We often feel that we are just this small person nobody will listen to. But voting is very

powerful. It's important to know who your legislators are and tell them your stories.

"Even if legislators know that people with disabilities exist, they probably know very little about the issues. I learned it's powerful to take your personal case to them. To open the door. Everyone has a story to tell, and your story is just as important as the next. Maybe more."

Partners enhanced the depth of Muhammad's passion for change.

"I have always been the type of parent who has a concern for other people's children. Partners gave me more tools, more insight and more information."

Although Muhammad was never shy about reaching out to legislators, PIP taught her how to reach out in more effective ways.

"I now know how to meet and greet legislators, how to find them at the Statehouse, how to approach a legislator in Trenton when he or she is having a slice of pizza and how to follow up. PIP also taught me about the power of the media and letter writing campaigns."

Smith agreed that a key part of the training was learning how to approach legislators.

"I learned that my first contact isn't about getting an end result, but to make myself known. That's the first goal—to make my legislators aware of me and my family.

After making those initial connections, Smith said, you can get to some more specific issues.

“My specific issue was with transition out of school. Although Sufyaan’s private school prepares kids, this isn’t really happening in the public school system. Parents don’t know that there are transition services available, so children don’t get them.

“Parents may want their children to eventually be able to live without them. And I know that’s possible. But transition help is necessary for success. I wanted my legislators to recognize this, because I know they can apply pressure to the Board of Education.”

Muhammad spends a good deal of time writing letters to legislators now.

“I’m working on convincing East Orange legislators about the need for better housing. I’ve also been working on promoting employment for people with disabilities. This will benefit the city and businesses.”

Smith and Muhammad know you can’t assume that other people know about developmental disabilities. And their PIP experiences reinforced that.

“We need more understanding of disabilities in our communities,” Muhammad said. “More organizations around here need to follow the lead of the Essex County College police department’s training about developmental disabilities.”

Since attending PIP, Muhammad began working with Rhonda Singleton at the East Orange YMCA with the NJ After 3 program. She and Singleton are working to find funding sources to create an inclusive after school program that children with disabilities can attend. She is also working with an East Orange music school on developing a music program that children with disabilities can attend.

“This area does not have enough inclusive extracurricular activities for children with disabilities. I hope to see a lot happening in the next couple years. It’s just a matter of getting started, and that means funding.”

Smith recommends that parents of children with disabilities keep the channels open with their legislators. “Know their names and phone numbers. Drop by their offices. Write and call.”

Since his son is only 10, his father isn’t sure what Sufyaan will want to do with his life. Right now, he is enjoying the New Beginnings School, learning social skills, playing video games, learning to type, playing soccer and baseball—the usual.

However, Smith knows that adulthood is just around the corner. He wants to see his son have a job and his own apartment someday.

“I know it’s possible, because I’ve seen other people do it.” **P&F**

## FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

To find information about any of the resources mentioned in this article, see below:

**TO CONTACT NJ AFTER 3,  
call (732) 246-7933, or Email [info@njafter3.org](mailto:info@njafter3.org)  
or go to [www.njafter3.org/index.php](http://www.njafter3.org/index.php)**

**FOR MORE INFORMATION ON PARTNERS IN POLICYMAKING,  
contact Advocacy Training Coordinator Dennie Todd, 609.984.4516  
or email [dennie.todd@njcdd.org](mailto:dennie.todd@njcdd.org)  
or go to: [www.njcdd.org/PartnersInPolicymaking/advocacy.htm](http://www.njcdd.org/PartnersInPolicymaking/advocacy.htm)**

**TO CONTACT THE STATEWIDE PARENT ADVOCACY NETWORK (SPAN),  
call 1-800-654-SPAN or email [span@spannj.org](mailto:span@spannj.org) or go to: [www.spannj.org](http://www.spannj.org)**

**TO CONTACT AUTISM NJ, call 1-800-4-AUTISM  
or email [information@autismnj.org](mailto:information@autismnj.org) or go to [www.njcosac.org](http://www.njcosac.org)**