

Partners in Policymaking

Class of 2006

“A Force for Good”



Graduation Speeches

April 29, 2006

Houston, TX

Gerard Jimenez
Class Spokesperson

I would like to begin by thanking all our guests who came to share this momentous occasion with us. We have family and friends here from all over the state who have given us so much support over the past year while we have traveled off to work on increasing our knowledge, skills and abilities to advocate for our loved ones and the community at large. On behalf of every Partner here, thank you very much for your unwavering support.

We would also like to take this opportunity to assure you we were working hard in class all weekend long to be the best advocates we possibly can be and not partying in the hotel bar the whole time.

We would also like to welcome our distinguished guests from the Texas Council for Developmental Disabilities, Roger Webb, Executive Director, and council members Mary Durham, Vickie Mitchell and Susan Baker; and former council member Rudy Acosta. Thank you very much for being here today. We really appreciate your support.

The success of the Partners in Policymaking Program would not have been possible without the support of the Texas Council for Developmental Disabilities and the Family to Family Network. We are forever grateful for these organizations dedication and commitment to supporting the continuing education on disability issues to the community.

We have been privileged to follow in the footsteps of giants. There are many giants in the Partners in Policymaking Program to whom we will always be grateful. From the Texas Council for Developmental Disabilities, Jan Newsom, Chair; John Morris, Vice Chair; Roger Webb, Executive Director; from the Family to Family Network, Executive Director Eve Cugini; Chief Cat Herder and Program Coordinator Laura Buckner; Assistant Chief Cat Herder and Director of Finance and Administration, Mary Jane Williams; Travel Coordinator and Administrative Assistant, Jan Sheehy; Administrative Assistant, Maria Stiger; and Associates Amber McCarthy and Bill and Teri Sullivan.

We have been very fortunate to have had the opportunity to meet and learn from some of the country's best experts in the field of disability research, advocacy and training. The speakers who shared their expertise and insight with us were exceptional and engaged us with their talent and insight. We would like to express our deep appreciation for their participation in the Partners Program.

We would like to thank Colleen Wieck, Charlene Comstock-Galagan, Colleen Horton, David Pitonyak, Shelly Dumas, Don Sikkink, Ed Roberts, Mark Homan, Eve Cugini, Chris Hess, Michelle Guppy, David Caster, Roger Webb, Colene Wieck, Patrick Connally, Kathie Snow, Joe Meadours, Gaby Fuentes, Jonas Schwartz, Denise Brady, Joanna Cordry, Richard Dodds, John Moore, Cheryl Bates-Harris, Mary Fitzgerald, Juliette Rizzo, Amy Litzinger, Linda Litzinger and all the past Partners who came back to share their knowledge and wisdom with us.

We would also like to recognize and thank Jopie Hasenbank. Jopie Hasenbank is responsible for bringing the Partners program to Texas 15 years ago. Your vision and determination to bring the highest quality disability issues educational program to the state of Texas has been an unqualified tremendous success. There are now over 13,000 Partners graduates world wide with over 600 in the state of Texas. Thank you very much for all you did to maintain the tradition of excellence and bringing Partners to the Great state of Texas.

Issac Newton once said "If I have seen farther than others, it is because I was standing on the shoulders of giants."

All of the people involved in the Partners Program have shared their vision with us and have inspired us to work to fulfill our dreams. The dream of a society where all people are appreciated for their abilities and not marginalized for their disabilities.

I would also like to thank my fellow Partners for using their new found skills in parliamentary procedures to railroad me, I mean, select me to give the graduation speech with my fellow Partner, Candi.

All kidding aside, on behalf on Candi and I, we are humbled and honored that you chose us to give the graduation speech for the class. Thank you.

While we all know we will write many chapters in the name of progress for those who have disabilities in the world, it's hard to believe this chapter of our Partners journey is coming to an end. It seems like we just started our journey and now we are graduating from what has been described by many experts in the field of disabilities as the Harvard education on disability issues. We are truly honored and privileged to be a part of the Partners in Policymaking Program legacy. Because of our Partners' training, we will return home with the knowledge and tools to create positive changes for people of all ages with disabilities and make meaningful contributions in our communities. We move forward with a new vision of greater opportunities, greater possibilities for people with disabilities.

I know that every Partner is deeply saddened that this is the last Partners in Policymaking Program scheduled. I think it's fair to say we are even distressed that not only will past Partners not have the program as a resource but future generations will not get the privilege to participate in the program as we know it. While it may be possible to morph the program into another form for distribution and assuming the quality of content of the program is reproduced I cannot help but wonder if the bonds of friendship that were created by the program in its current form have been given enough consideration of its value. I know that the bonds each of us created during our time spent pursuing our quest for knowledge in this program will last a life time and will ensure a strong network that will give us the ability to provide support to each other for years to come.

The disability rights movement is one of the last if not the last civil rights movement of our time. It is now our responsibility to go into our communities and share the wealth of information we have with our family and friends, our neighbors, our schools and our local and state governments to create a new era of enlightenment in our society as a whole. What we have learned needs to be shared with every single person in our community.

Franklin Delinore Roosevelt once said "If civilization is to survive, we must cultivate the science of human relationships - the ability of all peoples, of all kinds, to live together, in the same world at peace."

Margaret Mead once said "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

We are now Partners. We are a part of a small group of thoughtful committed citizens. And I can assure you...we will change the world!

Kristen Cox
Partners in PolicyMaking
Graduation – March 29, 2006

I liken my Partners journey to the life of a butterfly. When I applied for Partners it was as if I had dropped an egg on a leaf, hoping it would bear fruit. I remember getting the phone call that I had been accepted – I had no idea what Partners would really be about. I just knew it might help me to better the life of my 10-year-old son, Kyle, who has muscular dystrophy.

In the life cycle of a butterfly, the most growth occurs during the caterpillar – or larva - years when the caterpillar eats all it can in preparation for its transformation. These months of training were my time as a caterpillar. [No, I'm not talking about all the junk food you guys forced down my throat.] I'm talking about taking in every morsel of knowledge I could process during these training sessions (spitting out the politically charged messages), growing in my knowledge and passion for disability issues.

Just as a caterpillar molts – or sheds its skin – several times, I did the same. I shed some language that was not people first. I shed some ideas that were born of a lack of knowledge. I shed some priorities that gave way to my new passion for disability. I'm still shedding – just not those pounds from the force feeding!

Today the cocoon splits open and I emerge from my chrysalis - my time as a butterfly begins. I have no idea what color or shape my butterfly will take on, or where this journey will lead, but I'm anxious to begin. I take comfort in knowing I have 35 other butterflies along side of me, and hundreds who have gone before me.

I must admit that my motives were initially selfish in that I wanted to see how Partners could help me to improve Kyle's future. But by the end of the first session I felt a bit enlightened – there were so many more issues in the disability community that I had not known existed- not to mention a new language I needed to learn!. With each new session my passion for my own cause seemed to diminish, blending with a passion for the various issues of all people with disabilities. My own issues paled in comparison to what some of you are dealing with. I have been so incredibly inspired by my fellow partners, especially the self-advocates in this room. Each and every one of you has taught me something, and I have so much respect and admiration for you. Candi you are such an inspiration to me – you have shown me that I can dream bigger dreams for Kyle!

I'm ready to take flight. I look forward to seeing the beautiful colors and shapes that each of us will display as we start our life of advocacy, and I thank all of you for being a part of my journey.

David Forbis

My name is David Forbis and I'm from Ft. Worth. Partners taught me how to work with other people. It changed my life because I help others with disabilities.

The best part about Partners for me was telling others about my life and helping others understand about living with a disability. I live in my own apartment and have been working since March.

I hope to further my education and would like to work in the church. I plan to get connected with a self-advocacy group in my area. I'm glad I became a Partner!

Kristi Foret

What Partners in Policymaking Has Taught Me

I have learned that I have a voice. Where once I was quiet and content with the system, PIP has helped and encouraged me to use that voice. Partners has also renewed my faith and compassion for people, with and without disabilities. Once I may have been passive, now I cannot remain a silent bystander for the issues of my heart. Partners has taught me that in order to make an impact in the community I must first impact my own little world. No one ever said raising a child with a disability would be easy, but I've learned that the difficulties in life are intended to make us BETTER, not BITTER. Difficulties are meant to rouse, not discourage. The human spirit is to grow strong by conflict. I have learned how to manage the difficulties better, and in turn, become a better and more compassionate parent and person. I've learned to use my voice to make a positive and supportive impact on the world around me. I will take the knowledge that I have gained from PIP to help the world discover the great ABILITIES of people with disabilities. Because of this training, my son Cody will be seen as a person, not just a 'disabled kid.'"

I jumped into PIP less than 2 months after Cody's diagnosis, hoping to gain some information regarding disabilities, but what I have received in return is an amazing gift of knowledge and insight. The Partners program, and my fellow partners, have been my support team, my mentors, and my own personal cheering squad. Partners has given me the courage to become a louder advocate and cheerleader for Cody and others with disabilities. During my PIP training, I came across a Bible verse that I now carry with me at all times to remind me of my training:

"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be fulfilled." Matthew 5:5-6

Partners has truly shown me how blessed I really am, and for that I will be eternally grateful. I'm also very thankful for the support of my family and friends and their constant encouragement throughout this program. Lastly, I am thankful for the amazing gift that God has chosen to give me: Cody, who teaches me more and more each day.

Laurie Garza

Sitting here today, I am a different person than when I sat here last August. When I started the Partners in Policymaking program, I was hopeful that I would learn a few things, and be better educated on issues that affected my son's life and my friend's children's lives. But I didn't expect to be changed in the way that I have been.

Someone, maybe it was Laura, told us in our first session that we would feel all sorts of emotions through this training process. I couldn't really understand how a "training class" would do that, and I really never thought that I would cry! But I was wrong. I have laughed, cried, been uncomfortable, and been angry. And through it all, I have been changed.

Today, I not only have more confidence in myself as an advocate, but more understanding and direction of where we need to be as a society. I now see things as a whole, how different issues affect different people throughout our country, not just in my little corner of it. It has as much, or more, to do with the relationships I have developed with my fellow Partners as it does with the excellent presenters we have heard.

The one thing that I have learned that stands out above all the rest is that WE, each one of us, has the power to make positive changes. We can educate, we can change attitudes, we can effect change in laws and policies, and more. We not only can do it; it is our responsibility to do it. I used to think "someone else will take care of that, and they will be better at it anyway." Now I know how wrong that assumption was for many reasons.

I have been blessed by this program, and everyone involved with it! My goal is to take what I have learned here, practice it and share it, and make a positive difference for my son's life and for the lives of others with disabilities.

Ivy Goldstein

Good afternoon, my name is Ivy Goldstein and I'm from Austin. First, to my family, David, Jeremy, and Sophie, your being here for me adds much joy and meaning to this day. Thank you for many months of encouragement and support.

Within moments of beginning of our first Partners session, I realized that I wasn't nearly as comfortable with 'disabilities' as I'd thought. My Partners' training has been a transforming, sensory-altering experience in countless ways.

My eyesight and my vision have changed immeasurably.

I see now that there were barriers staring me in the face that I'd never noticed. I also see new possibilities and opportunities I had not seen before.

Before Partners, I was blind to the discrimination and the countless ways people with disabilities are marginalized and separated. I used to think, so what if my daughter, Sophie, is in a life skills class and not included with her typical peers? She's happy. Now I see how it is wrong to segregate a group of children, give them a sub-standard, non-academic education, presume their incompetence, and deny them their rightful place in the heart of community life, where everyone belongs.

Now my vision is clearer and I can look far beyond the school years and see how the experiences our children have today will have a profound impact on the life they will lead tomorrow-- when the school bus stops coming.

Our training, and the opportunity to get a glimpse of the world through the eyes of our Partners who are here as Self Advocates, made me see that empowering individuals to maximize their independence must be the norm, not the exception.

My hearing isn't the same either. Before Partners, I thought I was listening but I never really heard the voices of adults with disabilities. On more than one occasion, my Partner Eric and I were in the hotel restaurant ordering lunch. A well-meaning waitress would ask me what Eric wanted. I actually started to answer for him. I was deaf to the offense that Eric, like many people with disabilities are assumed to be incompetent and ignored. I would barely start talking for him before he chimed in that he was perfectly capable of placing the order himself. I heard that loud and clear (and so did everyone else)!

Before Partners, I didn't hear how the word 'special' can be a sugar-coated term for separation and segregation. If being special means that our daughter and so many others will be kept apart, excluded, and sold a bill of goods that 'this is in their best interest,' I want no part of it.

It has been surprising to discover my keener sense of smell. My Austin Partners, Gerard, Katy, Eric, Amber and I arrived at the State School for a tour as part of our homework assignment. The air smelled fresh and clean. The staff we met was warm, friendly and answered our questions graciously. About $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way through the tour I started to smell a funny odor, and it became increasingly more noticeable. We were standing in the sheltered workshop. We were watching a group of men sitting in dark, dingy cubbies being repeatedly told to fill jars with plastic sticks. They earned a whopping penny for each jar they filled during the six hours a day they were there. These gentle men were breathing; they looked alive, sort of. I realized that the foul, stale odor was the aroma of a decaying institution where men with dreams now sat lifeless and rotting. It wasn't my imagination, sheltered workshops really stink.

A most meaningful change for me has been the one of feeling. Our knowledgeable and gifted speakers have left indelible impressions. Some of what they said hurt and made me squirm. Like the speaker who exposed my darkest secret. It turned out; this secret was shared among many parents. In time, and in the safety of our supportive family of friends, I'm not deathly afraid to look ahead to the day when David and

I can no longer care for our daughter. I'm optimistic about our ability to create a quality life for our sweet Sophie, and help others do the same.

My Partner classmates have stirred my emotions in the most significant ways. Bertha, when we first began this journey, you touched my heart first. I am grateful for the trust you placed in me and for your friendship.

I've often been moved by the emails we've shared on our listserv. I loved the first one from Candi announcing, "HEY, I'M DONE WITH MY HOMEWORK!" She soon followed with a joyous, "HEY, I DID IT! I'M MOVING IN 3 WEEKS!" There have times of frustration and anger. Like when a Partner shared with us her painful experience of applying for a job at Goodwill. There were poignant moments like when David shared with us his heartfelt sentiments and sweetest dreams. These are lasting impressions that will stay with me forever.

Last, on this life changing journey, I'm savoring the sweet taste of success. Celebrating the accomplishments of my Partner classmates has been the icing on the cake. What could be more mouth watering than the taste of a dream-come-true and one of Katy's margaritas? Now we're including a new item on the menu that was inspired by a t-shirt. It's called, "Poof, you're gone." Whoever partakes gains the courage to break free from an unbearable, restrictive living situation and lead a life with self-determination and dignity. Alongside my Partners, I've eaten away at issues of great importance to all of us by writing letters, making phone calls, and giving public testimonies to our legislators.

Today, in contrast to last August, I feel at home pulling up a chair, with anyone in my Partners family and elsewhere. I am grateful to everyone who participated, and especially to my Partner classmates for their profound inspiration and for helping to create this feast. I am most grateful to now be able to share the bounty with my community.

Thank you.

Adriana Haro

My name is Adriana Haro and I'm from Laredo. The Partners Training has been a very emotional and inspirational experience for me.

This last 8 months, I've had the pleasure of meeting wonderful speakers and have had the opportunity to hear their personal and successful stories that have influenced the people with disabilities and their communities.

I've also been impacted by my fellow Partners with their personal stories and getting to know each and everyone of them.

The Partners Training has given me a variety of skills to assist me in continuing to advocate and to be able to understand more effective ways in trying to influence changes in the community. It is important to be educated to be able to understand the needs of those who have a disability as they can become an influential part of their community.

I cannot adequately express my appreciation to have been given this opportunity that has prepared and inspired us with this exciting stages of the journey that lies before us.

Bertha Hernandez

Mi nombre es Bertha Hernandez vivo en El Cenizo Texas en la frontera de Nuevo Laredo Mex. mi familia consta 4 miembros de familia Karla de 16 años y Leonardo de 13 años y mi esposo.

Yo siempre he buscado en trabajar con mi comunidad y el sistema escolar para hacer un mejor futuro no, nada mas para mi hijo, pero tambien para los niños con diferentes discapacidades del desarrollo. He tenido muchos obstaculos para lograr mi sueño, que mi hijo sea tratado como un niño normal y que el tenga la misma oportunidad de cualquier persona, de ser, lo que quiere ser, en esta vida. Para lograr este sueño mio, yo no sabia, lo que necesitaba, pero ya se, que los necesitaba a ustedes. Mi experiencia a sido muy fuerte ahora se como debo hacer mi trabajo y utilizar los recursos de mi comunidad y alcanzar agencias que deseen ser parte de mi comunidad, he madurado y ahora veo mis errores y se que debo de trabajar en mi ,para usar mis habilidades en como hacer una defensora perfecta. Creo firmemente que los individuos con discapacidades son personas productivas y enriquecen a nuestra comunidad. Lo que aprendi lo voy a poner en practica todos y cada uno de los entrenamientos, me ayudan a hacer mas eficaz y eficiente, solo tengo que ponerlo en practica y no perder de vista mis objetivos.

Quiero finalizar que le prometo que lo que he aprendido durante este curso lo voy a llevar a mi comunidad asi como cada presentador me ha enriquecido de su conocimiento.

Quiero hacer notar que agradezco a partners in policymaking a sus directivos y organizadores mis mas mejores deseo y un fino respeto carino a todo su esfuerzo por crear un mundo de esperanza y lucha en este universo sus partners (2006) como todos los que hemos resivio este curso vamos caminando en este mundo con lucha y firmeza proyectando la luz que han dejado en nuestras experiencias de nuestras vidas en defensa de las personas con discapacidades.

A su vez agradezco a Texas Council for Developmental Disabilities al Sr. Roger Webb. a bendecido muchas vidas a travez de este programa mil gracias.

Saludos y bendiciones a todos partners.

Lupe Hernandez

Partner's, Family, friends;

As the program is entitled, "Partner's In Policymaking", I have learned much more in 8 months than I have over 28 years working in this field. This form of reality therapy is essential to help us identify which road to take to make a difference.

I need to extend a warm thanks to my family especially my sister for the encouragement and means to get me to these sessions. Laura you were especially instrumental in having the confidence and support to make this happen despite my physical challenge.

From the inspirational presenters to the testimony at the Capital Building in Austin, this program has given me the skills and the knowledge to make the difference in my community and hopefully statewide.

One of the quotes presented was "Attitude is the real disability" which takes me into the following:

*If you think a person can't, he won't.
If you think a person might, he may.
If you know a person can, he will.*

Together we can make a difference, one step at a time.

I will remember my Partner's and new found friends who have also been inspirational making my journey even more purposeful. We released our obstacles to the sky this morning. Now it's time to carry the "torch".

*Thank You, each and every one.
Lupe Hernandez (aka John Paul's Mom)*

Paul Houston

Hello, my name is Paul Houston and I'm from Jersey Village, TX.

The Partners in Policy Making training has been an amazing journey, we have learned many things but I have learned more from the relationships we have developed with each other. What I plan to with my training is represent my son, teaching him to be a self advocate and an advocate for others, and teach my other children to be advocates as well. I believe in positive change for people with disabilities and educating others.

This training has made me a more courageous, confident and smarter person; empowering me to become an important part of the community, a least restrictive community with no barriers. I learned there is nothing special about special education.

It takes a village to raise a child. The passion, spirit and enthusiasm we have developed over the last 9 months needs to carry on to feed our village. I have a quote from an un-known author that I feel sums it all up perfectly:

"Enthusiasm was understood by the ancient Greeks to mean 'God within us' and so it is that when we open ourselves up to enthusiasm we perceive something from above that makes us capable of achievements otherwise beyond our powers. Enthusiasm is the burning spirit within that says 'I can', it is the indomitable 'Yes' without which nothing worthwhile is ever accomplished."

Thank you.

Gerard Jimenez

I would like to start by sincerely thanking everyone from the bottom of my heart who made this amazing, priceless, experience possible for me.

I came into Partners in Policymaking with the belief that I would gain the tools I need to become more effective at promoting positive change in my little corner of the world. I thought I would learn how the system works and more about why it's not working the way I think it should work. I was so sure I would learn strategies and techniques that would help me to promote positive change in my daughter's school and our community. I did. I learned all these things. But that's not all I learned. I learned so much more than I could have imagined.

I could talk about how I learned about the history of disabilities and how people with disabilities have been treated as angels from God by some and how they were treated as cursed by God by others. I could talk about people with disabilities being tortured or abused because of their condition by people who simply did not understand them or worst yet, despised them as inferior humans unworthy of being treated with dignity and respect. I could talk about the various disability movements throughout history from the beginning all the way up to the present. I could talk about daily fight that goes on all over the state to give our children an education with their typically developing peers in an inclusive classroom, rather than a segregated classroom in some portable out of sight and out of touch from everyone else in the school. I could talk about how people with disabilities have a 75% unemployment rate. I could talk about how our government is willing to spend \$120,000 to have a person with disabilities in a state school but is unwilling to spend a fraction of that giving people the chance to live with dignity and freedom in a group home or with foster parents. I could talk about disability legislation that would help people with disabilities and others that would not. I could talk about how to prepare testimony and testify at a hearing on disability issues. I could talk about how important people first language is and how powerful words really are. How words can give people the dignity and respect people deserve, or take it away. I could talk about how one of the biggest challenges people with disabilities face in life is the battle against loneliness. I can now talk about a wide array of issues and strategies related to disabilities. I will always be indebted to Partners for giving me this gift of knowledge.

I could talk to you about all these things, all the wonderful gifts of knowledge that partners has given me. But I am not going to. I'm going to talk about another gift I was given. The gift I was given is friendship. I was given the opportunity to be friends with people with disabilities, some like what my little girl has and some unlike what my little girl has... and with people with loved ones who have a disability, again, some like what my little girl has and some unlike what my little girl has. This was so meaningful to me. I've always believed that I am blessed to have an adorable little girl in my life who happens to have Down syndrome. For as long as my little girl has been in my life my disability world consisted primarily of people who have children with Down syndrome, just like my little girl has.

I learned that I am a part of a larger world where there are many people with different disabilities. I learned about cerebral palsy, I learned about multiple sclerosis, I learned about little people, I learned about being blind, I learned about autism, I learned about disabilities in a way I never imagined before in my little world. I learned about all these things from my friends.

To my surprise, I have had several deeply profound moments in class since becoming a Partner. I knew after the first session my life would never be the same. I want to share this experience with you.

During the first session on The History of Disabilities, we were given an assignment. We were told that we were going to have to make dates with our classmates. What this basically meant was that we were to pick fellow classmates for a brief date and at a designated time we would spend some time with them so we could get to know them. As I think back on this I'm sure there was more to it than that we were to suppose to do but to be honest it all has been overshadowed by a very special moment I will never forget.

To put this in context we had been spending the whole session learning about the injustices imposed on people with disabilities and the less than ideal living conditions they had to endure, the increased likelihood of abuse and total lack of control over their own lives. And I'm not just talking about ancient history either. Anyway, I was asked by a gentle, delicate woman in a wheelchair named Candi at lunch time if I would be one of her dates. Of course I said yes. I didn't give it much thought at the time we made the date, but later when we had our date I immediately realized what a profound impact she would have on my life. I discovered this delicate woman has an incredibly beautiful, strong willed spirit that refused to be denied the freedom and liberties so many of us take for granted. I discovered that this woman had been living in an institution for sixteen years and then a group home for ten years and recently worked successfully to get out of the group home into a real home with foster parents. And now here she was, my equal, a partner learning how to increase her ability to advocate for herself. So here I was sitting there talking to a person who lived for many years of her young life in settings like what we were learning about in class, someone who fought against the system and won. This was a true story of the triumph of the spirit. Wow. This touched me in a way that nothing else ever could.

And I will never forget hearing the testimony of one of my fellow Partners who testified at a mock hearing that she and her husband got a divorce just so their child with a disability could receive the benefits from the state that their child needs and could not get otherwise. I will never forget this and many other personal stories my friends, my fellow partners shared with me.

There have been several defining moments in my life. I can now add one more. I can define my life by who I was before I entered the Partners in Policymaking Program ... and who I am after graduating from the Partners in Policymaking Program.

I am now a Partner... I'll always be a Partner... for the rest of my life.

Bertha Jones

I'm Bertha Jones and I'm from Tyler, Texas.

What separates us from each other
isn't what's physical, but instead,
it's the attitudes and fears
we have about each other.

My dream is to build bridges
to close that gap, and
because of Partners,

I know I can achieve that goal!

Michelle Luper

Good Afternoon.

Recently I was asked, "Did you have any idea what you were getting into when you joined Partners?" I honestly could answer, "No." I had no idea the lessons that would be taught to me and the friendships that would be made and where my path would take me. Partners has made many changes in my life and way of thinking.

For instance, before Partners, in what seems like ages ago I was told, "Ask me if I need help before you help me." I did not realize how important this statement was and did not understand it. My partners during the program expressed to me how important it is to give independence and taught me this very early on. As I hope I will be able to pass on to others as time goes on.

Secondly, in the past I would focus my attention on the disability and then the person. I saw the wheelchair or the cane and sometimes never got to get inside the person. I now know I have missed so much. Through these months I have seen so much strength, intelligence, love of life, and tenacity, that I had never taken the time to see in parents and self-advocates before simply by stopping and listening and seeing the inner beauty of folks.

And lastly, my hopes and dreams for my daughter have skyrocketed well beyond anything I would have ever hoped. I was the great planner-planning for her future and not looking to her for direction or asking for her dreams. I thought career paths for children with disabilities were pretty well set in stone-sacker at HEB or janitorial work at the local McDonalds. I did not like it but could see no further. I now look to her for direction and we are following HER dreams.

I now do not leave here today with fellow partners. I have friends, family of folks across the State who share the same ideal of an inclusive life together in their community for themselves and or their children. Our projects and goals for the future will be different. We, as partners, are taking the road less traveled by and that has and will make all the difference.

Joanne Mayer

These last 8 months have been a journey for me. One of many that I'll walk in my life. And today it comes to an end only to yet have a beginning.

My story really started 20 years ago when I met a very dear woman who I was to become "friends" with. Over the years our paths would cross but we never really "connected" - that changed when my son was born with autism.

Over the last few years this friend has helped carry my burden that was too heavy for me alone. She taught me, helped me through many a crisis, and opened my eyes. She was always there.

Eight months ago I teamed up here at Partners with 36 other people who also had burdens they were carrying. Partners became an eye opener for me in that I wasn't able to see past my own problems in the beginning. I wasn't really aware of how big the world of disabilities was. We've spent these months becoming first just a name on a name tag to today where I can say in confidence that we're family. We've become fellow burden carriers - Partners.

A few months ago I met a young lady from Pasadena who had a great burden. She was having a lot of difficulties with her son both in the school and in getting services for him. I began reaching out to her and carried her burden for her. I passed on to her all that I've been learning at Partners and she began to grasp the vision herself.

I know this because just this week she reached out to another woman who also had a need - a burden - and she began to help her carry it. And the process began all over again.

I've heard it said many times that if you have a need - reach out the door to someone else - you'll find someone who has a greater need. And that's my desire today - that as I may finish here today with Partners - I'll continue in what the Word of God says - to go and carry the burdens of others and so fulfill the law of Christ. I desire to be there for other parents who are just starting their walk or who are struggling as they find their way in this world of disabilities - that they may learn as I have that it's really a world of ABILITY!!

Sonia Penn

Hi, my name is Sonia Penn and I'm from San Antonio. As most of you know by now we Partners bring home big binders to study after every session. At first they were really big but now lately they've been getting pretty small.

This last binder is the smallest one of all but this one had something special in it. It is a time capsule of sorts. It was our application to get into the Partners program.

One year ago we all sent in these applications and my how I've grown. When I began to read my application I was appalled. I was passionate and committed but I was promoting stereotypes.

Through the Partners program I have learned to see people as they are--people first. I have grown and learned so much in this past year. After going through this intense training I am now able to be an effective agent for change.

People First language was the first step in the right direction. Maya Angelou once wrote, "People may forget what you said, they may forget what you did, but they will never forget how you made them feel."

The Partners program has made me see that we are all one community. We are all People first.

Jennifer Puckett

Dear fellow partners, friends and my family,

First off, I want to thank my husband for being so supportive of me all these weekends that I have been gone—you're wonderful and I am blessed to have you; to my kids for bearing with me and being so good; and my mom and dad for helping with the kids and supporting me and believing in me making a difference for Dane. Thanks to all of my partners for enriching my life and making such an impact in my life. I have learned a tremendous amount from you all. I will miss you all and I will always cherish the weekends that we have spent together.

When we received the news that our son had a disability, it was like someone punched me in the stomach and knocked the air right out of me. I felt as though the ball was knocked out of my court. It was my serve, but the ball was no where in sight. Game over. What control I felt I had concerning my child left. I had much to learn about the diagnosis and what to do next. I was about to step into "disability world", as Kathie Snow calls it. All of a sudden I had all of these so called experts telling me what was best for my child. Let me rephrase: they were specialists in the field of the diagnosis, not in the field of my child.

Before I started my training, I hadn't even figured out how to communicate with my Dane, but after the very first weekend of our training I met someone who would make me realize that I had to figure it out. His future was dependent on it. Candi was that person. I could see Dane through Candi. Meeting and talking to her made me realize that Dane had much to teach me about life, more than he already had.

It was a very emotional moment for me. She encouraged me by basically saying, "Don't let people tell you what Dane can and cannot

do." Just in conversing with Candi and getting to know her, my eyes were opened as to how to start communicating with Dane.

Once home, I began asking Dane yes/no questions and he gave me answers that I really did not expect and some that I was not ready to hear. I was almost in tears and my husband replied that if I wasn't ready to deal with his answers, maybe I shouldn't ask those questions. That weekend opened up the lines of communication with Dane more than I ever could have imagined and I continue to be amazed at how much he knows. I have learned, through my son and the self-advocates I've met during my time with Partners, not to judge someone due to their disability. Disability doesn't change the fact that we all have strengths and weaknesses.

I have to say to Family 2 Family that this program would not be as effective had it not had self-advocates participate in the training and I thank you for that. These self-advocates have taught us so much about our children and life. Their presence in this program was invaluable.

I can honestly say that upon getting Dane's diagnosis, the dreams that I had for my son to go and do what he wanted with his life were shattered. Disability doesn't have to shatter dreams, it just alters the way you realize them. Raising Dane requires that I dig deeper and look closer at every situation in my life and his. I realize that too many times we focus on what's wrong and not what's right. I have learned to appreciate each person exactly as they are.

At the beginning of my speech I talked about the ball being knocked out of the court. Well, I found another one, the game is on and it's my serve. Participating in the PIP program has given me the control again, to be able to help my child achieve everything that he deserves in his life.

Jeane Rogers

My name is Jeane Rogers and I live in Kingwood.

I am a self-advocate working for change.

I have learned a lot from being in Partners.

My personal goal is to live on my own. By living on my own, I can learn to be independent because

I want to be just like my brothers and my sister and everyone else who lives in Kingwood.

I want to live at Stoney Glen!

Partners has helped me become more independent

than I was before by realizing that

I can have control over my own life.

Marieli Y. Sierra

Good Afternoon.

Only through God's planning I am here today surrounded by my fellow partners. I feel honored I had the opportunity to participate in this program.

Partners in Policymaking has changed the way I see people in general. I have learned to look beyond lacks and focus on strengths, that everybody counts and everybody belongs. Self advocates have taught me that there is not such thing as a disability ... just a different way to approach life and do things. It is my desire I tell others about this life changing experience and as I changed, I want to change them too.

The most important thing Partners did for me is that it got rid of my hurt and confusion. Today I enjoy my kids immensely. I embrace their uniqueness and celebrate their existence in my life. I don't worry as much as I did, I know what to say and answer because I have the knowledge, the power to make right choices and advocate for my children's education and dreams for the future.

Partner's lessons have been written deeply in each one of us. Advocacy is alive and tangible. The confidence you get from this training is empowering. The experience of sharing with adults with disabilities makes all the difference. For us inclusion started in this room back in August. Now, I want it to be real everywhere I go.

Let me tell you how Partners is impacting my community as I speak. For my graduation project I wanted to research inclusion barriers still present in my school district.

Ironically enough, several weeks ago, our superintendent proposed to cluster special education services in several campuses to help balance the district budget for the next few years.

Without my Partners training, I wouldn't understand the decision making process of Board or how can I influence their decisions, how can I get people together and fight for what we need. We have organized a group of parents who are opposed to the district's measures and have gone to the board meetings and testified why we oppose segregating special education students. We have written to the local paper and have convinced some of the board members to learn more about special education issues before casting a vote. This is all possible for me thanks to Partners.

Although I have graduated from other endeavors before, this graduation has a special place in my heart; for it was not in school or college that I found this type of passion and purpose, but through the experience of Partners and the smile of my children when I return home.

I am honest when I say this has been a life changing experience. The quality of the presenters and coordination of this program has been excellent. The unforgettable laughs and faces will always remain in my mind and soul. I thank God for giving me this opportunity and for taking good care of my sons Daniel and Samuel. Finally, I thank all the people involved with this program and to all of you who support me through this journey.

Thank you.

Amy Smith

Through Partners I discovered, even though I perceived myself to be a good advocate for people with disabilities I was really missing the mark. I thank God, the DD Council, Family to Family Network and Partners for having the foresight to see we all need continuing education to grow out of our ignorance into genuine advocacy.

The knowledge I acquired while in the Partners program came from fantastic presenters with incredible insight, from my peer self advocates, also with incredible insight from what they actually live and not what I thought was best practice as well as my peer advocates with their insight, and experiences. Bringing this vast amounts of diverse knowledge in one place, focused in on one issue at one time without any distractions has been an opportunity never to be experienced again in Texas.

I will take this unparalleled, unprecedented training out into our community locally and nationally by providing support to others so they can benefit from this awesome wealth of knowledge that I could not have possibly gained had it not been for Partners.

This training is of monumental importance to advocates, self advocates, and people with disabilities as well as other individuals. By supporting, guiding and training everyone we come in contact with, with the best practices that we have learned here in the past 8 months we will be laying a massive network of individuals to distribute a wealth of knowledge ordinarily unobtainable.

Take a moment to look back through a part in history that most of us are all very familiar with, the civil rights movements. Through education the wall of segregation is being torn down.

Partner's training is about furthering our education to continue to bring the wall of segregation down for people with disabilities. It is about equality, respect, and freedom in all aspects of life for all individuals.

Partners changed my life by joining me with others with the same desires for people with disabilities to stand up for what rightfully belongs to all people with or without a disability via our Constitution. We the people have made huge strides in education, employment, transportation and even politics with this training to over 550 individuals in Texas and 13,000 nationally together we can continue to bring down the wall, the wall of segregation.

Kristin Tassin

My name is Kristin Tassin and I live in Missouri City, Texas. First, I would like to thank my family for supporting me and allowing me to take part in the Partners program. I could not have done it without them. I feel so blessed to have been part of Partners. I feel as I think my fellow classmates do, that the speakers have been brilliant and inspirational and Laura, Mary Jane and Jan have been absolutely wonderful. But what I learned most came from my fellow Partners, particularly those with disability. Hearing your stories and being able to experience your lives alongside you has taught me things about my daughter that I never knew and given me a true understanding of life with disability. It is this deep understanding that I think is crucial for change and is what Partners is all about.

Partners is more than just training, it is a 9-month process that changed my life and opened my eyes to a world of disability that society does not want to see and does not take the time to understand. I truly believe that the smallness of our group contributed greatly to my learning experience, because I was able to get to know my classmates intimately and on a personal level that a typical, larger training class would not have allowed for. We were able to learn and grow together, at a slow pace, which deepened the experience for me and will cause it to last a lifetime and allow me to spread our message with a deeper sense of passion.

Partners is something I will carry with me forever - the speakers, the education, the skills and most of all my classmates. It has made me a stronger advocate, not just for my own child, but for issues that affect all people with disability. I plan to share all I have learned with as many people as will listen, and even those who don't want to. I plan to train parents on best practice and how to be better advocates for their children. But, most importantly, I hope to share with others the gift of understanding that was given to me through the Partners experience.

I am proud to be a Partner graduate and, regardless of what comes after us, the last class, I am honored to be a member of such an elite group.

Tracey Tatum

Good afternoon! My name is Tracey Tatum. I am from Nederland, TX, a small town between Beaumont and Port Arthur. A few months ago, I had never spoken into a microphone before except for my son's karaoke machine, and I never expected that I would have the courage to speak in public. But here I am...

It has been quite an adventure! We have been through a lot together in this Partners class – hurricanes, a surgery, a lost job, a new home, and a first day at college...just to name a few. I feel like we have become one big family. I would like to thank each and every one of my fellow classmates for sharing this experience with me. I learned as much from you as I did from the presenters in our sessions.

The most important thing that I learned is that we are proof that inclusion works. We were brought together by disability issues...some of us as parents of children with disabilities and some of us as individuals with disabilities. The funny thing is that after 8 months of class together, I find myself wondering which is which. And that is a wonderful thing because I no longer see the disabilities. Instead, I see your hopes and dreams, and have been witness to your accomplishments. That gives me great hope that I can change the ways that people in my community think about children and adults with disabilities. I have heard your ideas, listened to what you want in life, and they are just like mine. We are all the same. It's a wonderful realization that I don't think I would have known if it were not for Partners In Policymaking.

I would like to thank the staff of Partners – Laura, Mary Jane, Jan, and Eve; everyone at the Family To Family Network; and the Texas Council for Developmental Disabilities for working so hard to make Partners In Policymaking possible.

I would also like to thank Jeane, Anita, Jennifer P., and Amanda, for rooming with me and sharing your stories with me. Last but not least, thank you to my husband, Pate, for your love and support; to Beau, the best son a mom could ask for; and to Brianna, because you are perfect just the way you are.

Jennifer Vincent

I want to first and foremost say Thank You to my husband and children for supporting me during these past 8mths and understanding the need for my absence and the importance of my training sessions. Partners in Policymaking program has been a life changing experience from day one.

I have learned best practices, leadership skills and advocacy skills. Partners has given me a network of resources all over the state of Texas. During our Partners sessions we learned the meaning of a community and how to use natural supports. We learned in an inclusive setting and I am proud to say there was no segregation or prejudice present in our group.

Using my knowledge and skills learned, I plan on taking over the Family to Family network in Clear Lake with a fellow Partner Kristi Foret to provide educational training, advocacy skills and best practices related to disability issues to families in our area. I plan on applying for a governor appointed board position to better serve my community on a state level. I plan on giving my testimony whenever possible to state legislatures to advocate for people with disabilities.

I believe all people are truly created equal and deserve equal rights to make decisions for themselves, receive a quality education in a non-segregated setting, hold down a job of value and deserve to be treated with respect and dignity. People of all abilities should be included wherever they choose and I plan to advocate for this equality with the skills I have learned in this program.

Thank you for accepting me into this program. I am proud beyond words to call my self a Partner graduate and having had the privilege to be a part of this great class.

Taylor Wiginton

I am proud to be a graduate of Partners in Policymaking. I have been working hard and learning about different support groups like SNAP and other activities in the community.

I have become self-sufficient and successful.

My experience with Partners has taught me things like the history of people with disabilities, public speaking, and has given me the confidence to travel alone.

I am grateful for the new friends I have made through this life-changing experience together.

Thank you, Laura, for your support on my journey to becoming a Self-Advocate.

My future plans are to marry my girlfriend and move to Colorado.

Chris Wonnacott

Hi, my name is Chris Wonnacott and I am from Longview.
I applied to Partners so I could learn more about self-advocacy
and make my life better.

My goal was to get an outside job. I am now working at McDonald's
Monday -Friday 9am-1pm. I do the lobby and
some cooking and I like it.

I have more goals. I want to save money to help support myself and
learn how to keep my own checkbook.
I look forward to getting a cockatiel of my own.
My goal is to have my own bedroom so I won't have a roommate
constantly getting in my stuff.

Partners taught me to have goals and speak for myself.
It's important to speak up when something is wrong.

Thank you.

Candi Yarbrough

I was lost in the system before Partners. I lived in a Group Home and every day was the same. I experienced the world by listening to staff talk about what was happening in their lives.

Sometimes I had to look after my roommates while staff was taking care of personal business, on the phone, doing homework, etc. I was an advocate then. I had the willingness, but no support.

Partners has been the key that unlocked my life. The program helped me find the courage to leave the Group Home and get out of Day Hab.

Today, I live in a real home. I go to college, attend church; I'm an active member of the Women's Ministry. I'm surrounded by people I love and that love me.

I have learned that I can do anything, even kick butt when I need to.

Partners has taught me so much in such a short time. I'm so grateful I got the opportunity to attend.

I promise I will do all I can to make a difference. I will teach others that they can do anything they want, too. Next year, I'm going to Morocco to help work with children with Cerebral Palsy. Can you believe that?

My theme song is by Sara Hamilton. Here are some of the words:

“Hey, I'm in the now.
I'm living large; I'm feeling proud.
I tell you now it feels good to be free.
I'm better than I used to be.”

Thank you Partners.