

Maplewood resident says advocacy training class was life-changing

Partners in Policymaking program accepting applications through July 10

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Review staff

When Toni Malone of Maplewood signed up for the Partners in Policymaking program last year, she was looking for ways to better advocate for her son, Matthew, who has Down syndrome.

The class ended in May and Malone says she left with “a wealth of information” and the confidence to create a better life for not only her son, but also for others living with disabilities. She describes the free program as “a game changer.”

Advocating for inclusion

The Partners in Policymaking program was developed by the Minnesota Governor’s Council on Developmental Disabilities in 1987. In the last 30 years, the tuition-free program has helped more than 900 Minnesotans become effective advocates for themselves, their children and others with dis-

abilities. Through expansion to other states and countries, the program has trained more than 27,000 people worldwide.

Malone explains that 14-year-old Matthew, who is now in high school, has experienced a mixed bag of classroom inclusion. She describes the the beginning of his educational journey as “very positive.” In elementary school she says Matthew was included in traditional classroom activities. Middle school, however, she says was “disappointing at best.”

During the 2016-2017 school year at Woodbury High School, Matthew was included in the general education classroom for about half of his school day; the other half of his time was spent in a special education setting.

Malone says inclusion in schools was one topic covered thoroughly in the Partners in Policymaking program, as an entire weekend session was dedicated to the topic. Malone says Dr. Patrick Schwartz, an inclusion see **Program** on page 5 specialist from Illinois, was the guest speaker for this session.

“Research shows that all children do better academically, emotionally and socially if they are fully included in the general [education] classroom,” Malone explains.

Now, Malone says

she is utilizing the skills learned in the Partners in Policymaking class to take action by asking Matthew’s high school to revamp his Individual Education Plan to reflect full inclusion.

“For the upcoming school year, we are creating a strengths-based Individual Education Plan, which will support his civil right to be fully included in the general education classroom, with appropriate supports, to the fullest extent possible,” Malone says.

Training for effectiveness

Dr. Colleen Wieck, the executive director of the Minnesota Governor’s Council on Developmental Disabilities, said in a statement, “Many [graduates] have become leaders in their own communities as they speak up for people with disabilities.”

Malone says that in addition to advocating on a personal level, the class inspired her to give back to the community, so she is planning on applying to be a member of the Minnesota Special Education Advisory Council.

The Partners in Policymaking program is made up of two-day sessions that are held once a month on Fridays and Saturdays from September to May, except for one Sunday and Monday session in March,



when participants prepare and meet with legislators at the Minnesota Capitol. No session is held in December.

The class covers a different topic each session including the history of the disability and self-advocacy movements, inclusive education, supported living, competitive employment and ways to influence county, state and federal legislative processes.

Malone explains that the class is worth the time investment not only because of the information, but also the relationships participants build with each other.

"I met some of the most amazing self-advocates and parent/guardian advocates, who I am proud to call my friends," Malone says.

Malone says she highly recommends this class to "anyone who is passionate about making a difference in the disability community."

Wieck adds, "This program is based on the belief that systems change is best brought about through the efforts of those most affected by them, and we seek to arm these individuals with the tools needed to be successful in the public policy arena."

The Partners in Policymaking program is free to participants because costs are covered by a

federal grant. Child care and respite allowances are given, and overnight accommodations are also provided for those who travel from outside the metro area to attend the sessions, which are held at the Crowne Plaza Aire at 3 Appletree Square in Bloomington, near the Mall of America.

Mileage is reimbursed and meals are also provided.

Limited to 40 Minnesota residents, the class members are selected by a panel of program graduates and representatives of the Minnesota Governor's Council on Develop-

mental Disabilities. Those selected to participate must attend all sessions and complete homework assignments.

The application deadline is July 10 for the next class, which will begin Sept. 15 and 16. For further information or to receive an application form visit mn.gov/mnddc/partnersinpolicymaking/class35/index.html or contact Brenton Rice at brenton@togevents.com or 651-242-6589.

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submitted photo

Toni Malone, left, said she signed up for the Partners in Policymaking class to become a better advocate for her son Matthew who has Down syndrome. Malone is using the skills she learned to help make her son's high school education experience more inclusive. In this photo, Matthew is surrounded by his parents, Toni and Wayne, and his aunt Gina Meyer, right.



submitted photo

Toni Malone, front right, said the Partners in Policymaking class helped her network with others hoping to make a change for those with disabilities.