



Kelly and Chris Konechne with sons, Joe and Teddy

Advocating for those with disabilities

Kelly Konechne completes Partners in Leadership training

By: Sheila Crowley
Murray County News Staffwriter

Disabilities aren't easy to live with - especially for children. Often times they feel left out and secluded because of their inability to participate in an activity the same as those children who aren't disabled.

Kelly Konechne and husband, Chris, are the parents of Teddy and Joseph - both with disabilities. Teddy was born in July of 2015. A month after his arrival the Konechne's learned their son was born with achondroplasia (dwarfism). Three years later Joe arrived on the scene and within the first days of life he was diagnosed with Down's syndrome.

Both Kelly and Chris have

become very involved in programs and groups to help their boys in any way possible. They have never shied away from talking about their boys disabilities. In fact the couple moved from the Twin Cities shortly after Teddy's arrival so their extended families could be more involved in their children's lives.

Kelly takes part in several different facebook groups where parents can share their struggles and triumphs. One such group brought an awareness for advocacy training. Not knowing much about Partners in Policymaking, Kelly asked past participants what their experience was and if the train-

ing, in deed, was something beneficial.

Partners in Policymaking is a comprehensive advocacy training course for Minnesotans with disabilities and parents of young children with developmental disabilities. Training is presented in eight sessions over nine months. Participants become effective advocates for themselves, their children and others with disabilities.

Kelly recently completed this intensive training and was one of the participants featured in Access Press - a news source publication for Minnesotan's with disabilities. Although her sons are still young,



Konechne knows more resources will be needed later on. The class discussions, problem-solving, brainstorming solutions and hearing different perspectives has given her smart problem-solving skills. She valued the presentation on state services and how they work, covering waivers, appeals, TEFRA and more to learn about possible programs she might need.

The nine month training involved one weekend each month (Friday and Saturday) with the month of December off. They were held in the Twin Cities. The training is aimed to help individuals be more effective in advocating for needs of those disabled.

"As they gain experience in speaking up for people with disabilities, many have become leaders in their own communities," commented Dr. Colleen Wieck, executive director of the Minnesota Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities.

This highly acclaimed and finely tuned leadership training has helped more than 1,080 Minnesotans become leaders in their own communities over its 34-year history and many described it as "life changing".

Kelly commented her biggest take-away from the training was the relationships that were built amongst the participants. "I feel the training allows us to come together as a community and be stronger advocates for our children and those who are afflicted with disabilities."

Amongst the group taking the training, Kelly met a mother from Balaton whose children have a form of dwarfism. "It was nice to meet another person from southwest Minnesota who is in a similar situation."

Kelly's hope when entering the training was to bring more awareness about disabilities and become a better advocate. She definitely feels the training has brought her to a new level and gained more confidence to speak up and not shy away from advocating for their children. Kelly believes the training also put her in a better place to learn more about what is available for her boys in programming as well as hearing about other people's experiences with them.

There were a wide range of disabilities amongst the group including some who were there to advocate for themselves. Many were surprised to hear of the wide ranging impact of disabilities as the class shared personal stories and challenges. The training enabled Kelly to step back and take in what others are dealing with.

The training taps into national experts and uses group participation. Over the program's 34-year history, more than 1,080 Minnesotans have become leaders in their own communities. Many have described the training sessions as "life changing."

According to the *Access* article, the sessions cover the history of disability and ad-

vocacy movements, inclusive education, supported living and customized employment. Individuals learn how to influence county, state and federal legislative processes.

Kelly, herself, learned there are a number of sources available in Minnesota for disabled, however, many of them are only offered in the Metro area. "I think this will be my platform," she commented. "There are so many opportunities available out there - whether it be programs or services. Yet, how can those same programs and services make their way to southwest Minnesota."

She explained amongst the group attending many were either disabled adults, or parents of disabled children, living in the metro area. Kelly found their stories interesting and hopes somehow the knowledge of the programming and sources shared by them may help out-state Minnesotans who have disabilities as well. "What I realized is it's not just about a specific disability," shared Kelly. "There are such a wide variety of disabilities that if we work together, we can be a stronger voice for everyone." Examples Kelly used are work programs, furthering their education after high school or providing needed tools to be successful in the public. Kelly particularly enjoyed the stories shared by the self-advocates in the group. "It was nice to hear their perspectives and challenges they faced." She was particularly inspired by a young woman in a wheel chair who was in attendance who is quite successful and very well spoken. "Hearing some of her struggles

was very interesting.” Kelly recalled her challenge of trying to catch her ride on the metro while maneuvering the piles of snow on the sidewalks. Others spoke on their desire to live on their own instead of in a group setting and trying to figure out how to advocate their wishes.

Chris and Kelly are very involved in Little People of America as well as Down Syndrome Association of Minnesota (DSAM). Both Kelly and Chris appreciated the information shared by DSAM - especially during the pandemic. “They have done a lot of online things such as music therapy, sessions virtually, monthly zoom meetings for the teen group and most recently held a virtual prom for juniors and seniors.” They are also a part of Down Syndrome Diagnosis Network (DSDN). Kelly explained this network is basically online and have a wide range of facebook groups which are often times broken down in more specific ages and challenges. “There’s a feeding challenges group, another is a heart one because 50% of children with Down’s syndrome have heart issues - just to name a few.” Kelly and Chris both appreciate the opportunity to connect with families all over the world who also face similar difficulties as well as celebrate their children’s triumphs.

Both Teddy and Joe have occupational and physical therapy along with speech. However, during the pandemic, these have been a bit more challenging. All of the therapies became virtual visits which can be challenging with toddler aged children according to Kelly.

Both parents feel fortunate that their jobs have enabled them to work from home to keep the boys safe. “Chris usually works during the day and I will work during the kids’ naps and then switch off and let Chris take the boys at night and I work. It’s been a little chaotic, but we are making do,” shared Kelly.

The training has given Kelly new hope in trying to provide a somewhat normal life for their boys. “Ultimately,” she said, “people with disabilities just want to be included. The training stressed alot of inclusive environments and how to teach that. It’s really about understanding people’s perspectives. Those with disabilities can do anything anybody else can do...it just might be a little different.” She added, “Somebody’s value and worth isn’t determined by what they can accomplish. Everybody’s little successes come in different forms.”

Applications are being accepted for Partners in Policymaking now through July 10th with the training sessions scheduled to start in September. There is not cost for this program.

Costs for the Partners program are covered by a federal grant. Childcare and respite allowances are given, and overnight accommodations are provided for those who travel from outside the metro area to attend. Mileage is reimbursed, and meals are provided. Sessions are held at the Crowne Plaza Aire, at 3 Appletree Square in Bloomington, near the Mall of America and the Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport.

The training is limited to 40 Minnesotans, participants are selected by a panel of Partners graduates and representatives of the Minnesota Governor’s Council on Developmental Disabilities. The first weekend session for the 2020-2021 program years is set for September 11-12, 2020. Local experts and nationally recognized leaders in school inclusion, community organizing, governmental processes, and disability issues are among the presenters. Applications can be made online at <http://mn.gov/mnddc/partnersinpolicymaking/class38/index.html> and are due by July 10, 2020.

Those selected to participate in the program must attend all sessions and complete homework assignments. For further information, or to get an application form, go to the above website or contact Brenton Rice at brenton@togevents.com or 651-242-6589.

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of disabilities that if we work together,
we can be a stronger voice for everyone.”**

KELLY KONECHNE

Graduate of Partners in Policymaking

DEATH NOTICE

Robert Allan Schmidt, 66, of Slayton, Minnesota passed away on Sunday, June 14, 2020 at the Hillcrest Nursing Home in Mankato, Minnesota. A memorial service will be held at a later date. Totzke Funeral Home of Slayton is entrusted with arrangements. To send condolences visit totzkefuneralhome.com

