New Jersey
Partners in Policymaking

New Jersey Partners in Policymaking
Graduation Panel Presentation
Class of 2022-2022

COLLEEN MCLAUGHLIN: So, this year's class truly shines both individually and collectively.

Their passion for promoting rights, dignity, and all that we value has shined through in many ways throughout the year. I don't want you to take my word for it though. Partners graduation wouldn’t be complete without hearing from these amazing advocates.

Each of these advocates is going to speak about a variety of topics today, sharing what they've learned, sharing their advocacy goals, sharing how they benefited through Partners.

The first group we'd like to start with is going to discuss the most important things they've learned through Partners in Policymaking, and I’d like to welcome Abbey Horwitz, Sandra LoPiccolo, Gopi Gopalakrishnan, Leidy Infante, and Sena Kumapley to come up.

ABBEY HORWITZ: Good morning. My name is Abbey Horwitz. My name is Abbey Horowitz. Thank you all for being here today.

Over the course of the last 8 months, of course, we learned about the history of the disability movement and learned important advocacy skills.

But for me the most important thing I learned in Partners is that we're not alone, as many of our speakers have already stated. As a parent of a disabled child, we so often get caught up in our own personal silos: work, school, doctors’ appointments, therapies, rinse, and repeat.

Partners taught me, or made me remember, that we're not alone, that there are others out there who are in a similar position, who we can call upon to help, to brainstorm, or just to listen, and who are also advocating for change in the disability community.

We have each other, you know, the members of our 2023 cohort. But there's also the Partners who came before us, and the many who will come after us.

There are also the many Partners in Policymaking participants around the country. Before this, I had no idea this was even a national program.

So, the depth and breadth of knowledge and experience that each of us brought to the table makes us a vibrant community, and has done amazing things in the past, and we now have the tools and skills to hopefully continue on this path for many years to come.

SANDRA LOPICCOLO: Sorry I can't see without my glasses. Just bear with me a minute.

Good morning. Thank you all for being here with us today. My name is Sandy LoPiccolo. I live in Maplewood, New Jersey, with my husband, Matt, and my 2 daughters, our 2 daughters, Ellie and Maddie, who are in the back of the room, and they're here with me today. I'm really thankful that they're joining in in the celebrations.

I must be honest, of all the questions we've been asked over the course of this past year, this one was the hardest for me to answer.

And if you ask anyone in our class, I'm never at a loss for words. I really struggled with how to answer it to the point where I kind of put it off altogether.

I suppose it's because everything we learned in Partners was important.

About a week ago I pulled out my notebook, flipping through page after page of notes, hoping to be inspired, and it was really astonishing and quite remarkable to see everything that we learned over the past 8 months. I did eventually sit down and put my thoughts to paper. And here's what I concluded, at least for myself.

It all boils down to 2 things that I will always carry in my journey as an advocate.

Lead with your story and trust your voice.

At its core, advocacy is rooted in storytelling. Stories have the power to persuade and move people to action. By sharing your story with people, they'll not only understand the what, but the why.

But you can't tell a good story without trusting your voice. It's all about believing in yourself and knowing what you have to say is important, and that it matters because you are the expert.

And when you finally speak up and share your story, you suddenly realize there are others in the room listening and rallying behind you, and that's where the magic happens.

I experienced this firsthand a couple of weeks ago, when my class presented mock testimony in front of legislators from across the State. I advocated for handicap accessible parking permits to families of children with autism, which New Jersey doesn't currently offer.

I led with my story, and spoke about my own personal experiences as a parent with a child of autism. A few days later I emailed every legislator who attended that day, and guess what… they all emailed me back personally.

They each pledged to do what they could because my story made all the difference, and each one of them did say that.

It was a real eye opener for me, and the moment where everything just clicked, and I suddenly realized well, every single presentation we sat through, and every homework assignment that Colleen and Jaime gave us, gave us a deeper dive into the topic that we learned. It was a journey to becoming better advocates, and becoming better at knowing ourselves.
Don't get me wrong. It wasn't easy. We had some tough conversations. We shared some laughs and shed some tears. But we listened to each other, and supported one another, and I'm so proud of how far we've all come.

I'm surrounded today by a remarkable group of people who are all sitting in front of me, and next to me. I consider them my fellow Partners, and my friends. They all have hopes for a better future for people with disabilities. Each one of them brings to the table their own stories and their own voice. And let me tell you, they have a lot to say.

While our time here together as a class is coming to an end, it's really just the beginning, and I can't wait to see what tomorrow brings. Thank you.

GOPI GOPALAKRISHNAN: Good morning. My name is Gopi Gopalakrishnan, and my son was diagnosed with autism, and eventually schizophrenia when he was in college.

So, I had to all of a sudden, it felt like drinking from the fire horse in terms of I did not know anything about autism or schizophrenia.

And I reached out to organizations such as NAMI Middlesex. That's how I came to know my fellow board member and friend Sue. And I talked to so many other families, and I reached out to organizations such as Autism New Jersey.

So, through what of mouth and talking to other people is how I came to know about The Boggs and Partners in Policymaking. So, though we were, you know, in Zoom or, I was not able to come to in person except one class because my son was hospitalized for his schizophrenia, and I had to care for him.

So somehow, what I feel is, even though I haven't talked to all of my classmates that closely, I feel like there is a connection. And so, sense of belonging and I feel like we are part of the family, and this group understands, because of the lived experience, what I'm going through.

So, as Abbey was saying, I really feel like I’m not alone in this journey. And even though nothing is perfect in this world, I am so proud that in our State there are organizations such as New Jersey Council on Developmental Disabilities, Disability Rights, and The Boggs Center.

There are a lot of investments happening to enable families to advocate for themselves. And there are still challenges in terms of getting services from DDD or other places. But at least, you know, I’m happy to see that there are initiatives and investments happening, and this group, collectively, we are trying to make things better for our families and for other families in the future.

So, you know, I’m really privileged to be part of this group, and I look forward to continuing my advocacy efforts and pass it forward. Thank you.

LEIDY INFANTE: Good morning, everyone. My name is Leidy Infante. Thank you so much for this great opportunity to have been participated in this program through this 8 months.

As a parent who has a child with autism spectrum disorder, I feel happy in being part of this extraordinary programs to prepare us to make changes in our children and individual with disability.

In each meeting, I learned advocacy and leadership skill along with basic knowledge of the best practice that can assist people with disability and families in obtaining the services necessary for them.

The Partners in Policymaking offers meaningful themes for me to help me to be ready to advocate and understanding there are many possibility to continue making changes and support citizens with intellectual disability become in the communities.

Also, it’s provided facts and details how to important and continue working for our children, and support other family with people with disability. Definitely these training have been very informative and educational, supporting to improve our skills and knowledge about advocacy.

For me this is a wonderful experience. It's changing my life for good.

This journey has only been possible because of the people that have encouraged and support me along all the way, especially my family, my husband, my son Daniel and my mom.

I also would like to express my appreciation for all participants. Also, to thank Colleen and Jaime. Both worked persistently hard to make this group learn, engage to success.

I extremely thankful of this organization supporting in this program to help us achieve this accomplishment. Thank you so much.

SENA KUMAPLEY: Okay, all right. Good morning, everyone. My name is Sena Kumapley, and being a part of Partners has been such a privilege.

I remember last summer, my mother had encouraged me to do it, and as I'm sure many other siblings in the room can attest to, I was like, okay, Mom said it, and she's not going to get off my back unless I apply.

But honestly, this has been such an enriching experience for me. As a sibling, I have always been an advocate for my brother, but it's difficult to do so when you don't have the tools that you need in order to really make sure that the people that are supporting your family member are doing what they say they will.

So for me, being a part of Partners really encouraged me, and helped me learn all about the different legislation that has provided the foundation for all of the disability rights, including the IDEA and the ADA, and that has been something that I have started to read, and hopefully, once grad school is done, I can finish.

The other thing that I think has been really empowering for me is the importance of listening. I feel that I have always tried to listen to my brother, but, as my mom will say, I am his second mother, and will sometimes try to impose my thoughts, and unintentionally, of course, just in the interest of trying to protect him.

But the thing that I learned the most was that, including him, and giving him the space to share, and making sure that his thoughts are being honored, is the most important thing that I can do as his sister.

And as Sandy mentioned, continuing to share his story. And the last thing I'll say that Partners has taught me is the power of social media and all of the resources that are available.

As my mom will say, I have joined at least 12 Facebook groups and the notifications on her phone, I'm sure are going off all the time. But, this has made me realize that advocacy is not a journey or a road taken alone, and having so many people around me. this past 8 months has been really encouraging.

So, I'm so grateful to all of you for your support and to my mom for making me do this. You were right. And to Colleen and Jaime, for their continued support. Thank you.

COLLEEN MCLAUGHLIN: Thank you so much. Give them a round of applause as they leave the stage.

So, we're excited that the next group is going to share some of their goals for advocacy, and the changes they'd like to see as a result. I welcome to the stage Octavio Cuenca Maldonado, Monique Powell, Octavio Nash, Parul Khemka, and Omar Abusada.

OCTAVIO CUENCA MALDONADO: Okay. Good morning. Everyone congratulations to the class of 2023. I am Octavio, and I am a proud, Deaf, Latino individual, and I would like to share my advocacy experience with you.

My goal is to improve the quality of healthcare and accessibility for the Deaf community.

Members of the Deaf community have experienced many frustrations due to barriers and challenges to appropriate healthcare. They've also experienced traumatic experience, traumatic adverse experiences through childhood, such as communication issues, discrimination, isolation, etc.

I would like to make sure that my advocacy work improves the experiences for members of the Deaf community to provide better services and opportunities for deaf people which are more inclusive and accessible and growing the pool of professionals who work with these individuals who have a shared experience.

I also, in my work, collaborate with various organizations, supporters, allies of the Deaf community, to enhance and improve the healthcare for members of the Deaf community.

I would like to encourage policymakers and individuals to work on, enhancing the experiences for Deaf community in health care and improve the services that they get to prevent other issues, such as mental health issues.

I would like to also make sure that the isolation that deaf people feel is reduced, so that could help also their mental health issues, and then they can get better quality of care and accessibility linguistically and culturally.

And in conclusion, I would like to say that my advocacy work is to reduce the mental health issues that the members of the Deaf community experience by improving their cultural linguistic accessibility within the health care systems, and by doing so providing better therapy, group therapy, healthcare for the overall well-being of the individuals.

And I’d like to see that improvement happen for all people, including members of the disability communities at large. So, thank you again for your time and attention and congratulations to the class of 2023.

MONIQUE POWELL: Hello, everyone! Good morning. My name is Monique Powell, and I am from, well thank you for being here, first of all. I am from Camden County, New Jersey, and my advocacy goal is to continue to educate and help parents and caregivers advocate on behalf of their children with special education rights.

The changes I would like to see as a result of my advocacy is less children being placed out of out of their home district and for more school districts to provide an inclusion education.

Both disabled and non-disabled peers benefit from being in an inclusion environment. With my advocacy I will continue to fight for this change to happen. So, thank you.

OCTAVIA NASH: Good morning everyone. My name is Octavia Nash. I'm the mother of a 21 year-old son, Jaylen. He's in the back.

I just want to start off and say, thank you for attending. Thank you to my family for supporting me. Thank you for my friends. Thank you to my peers, who are now my friends in this program. And thank you, Jaime and Colleen, for providing this opportunity.

When my son was first diagnosed with a developmental disability, I didn't know what advocacy was. I didn't know the true definition of the word. I just wanted to make sure he grew up in a world that did not treat him differently because of his disability.
That was my initial goal, and it remains at the core of my advocacy work today. As my experiences in advocacy grew, so did my understanding of it, what it should look like, and who should be spearheading the efforts.

I would like to see the following changes as a result of my advocacy efforts. More individuals and families with disabilities included in the policy making process. Nothing about us without us is a term that I was first introduced to in Partners in Policy. In short, it's a slogan used to communicate that no policy should be decided without the input of individuals with disabilities and their families.

My advocacy goal is to empower individuals and families to become involved in the policy making process from the very beginning to the very end. Another goal is to increase access to disability resources. In New Jersey, there's a huge disparity when it comes to access to disability resources by region, socioeconomic, class, and race. I'm passionate about making sure that individuals with and families that need resources have access to them.

My advocacy goal is to continue working with the New Jersey Black I/DD Consortium to provide resources to underrepresented communities throughout the State, and I would like to thank the New Jersey Council on Developmental Disabilities for funding that program. It has been a huge success in getting resources to underserved communities.

And my last goal is to make sure there's stronger representation in disability advocacy. The vast diversity within the community is its greatest strength. We need to acknowledge the importance of intersectionality and disability and empower individuals from marginalized communities to share their experiences, to help shape disability policy.

My advocacy goal is to recruit, educate, and mentor disability advocates from diverse backgrounds.

Again, I would like to thank Partners in Policy for this wonderful opportunity. Thank you to the partner agencies that contributed to this and make that happen. I'm excited to share resources with other families to strengthen disability policy and advocacy in New Jersey. Thank you.

PARUL KHEMKA: Good morning, everybody. My name is Parul Khemka. I'm a mom of 3 wonderful children. My oldest is 14, and a person with autism. My other 2 boys are always making sure that I’m staying young.

My husband and my sister, who is here, are my rocks, and always supported me in my journey. This journey began when our first-born daughter who was 2.5 and diagnosed with autism. I remember walking out of the doctor's office wondering what would happen to her after I’m gone. Even then this was my concern, and it's eye-opening, that after all these years this still remains my concern.

I want to work towards advocating for a continuum of housing options and increasing housing that is meaningful for everyone. A coalition of family and self-advocates who can come together and work on this allows you to meet other family and self-advocates to develop programs would be a starting point that I want to advocate for.

Housing solutions have long wait lists, most impacted are those with most severe behavior or medical needs. For those parents, this journey is still full of questions and roadblocks. There are, there are long lists, and even with those you have no guarantees.

The lack of options means many have to move far away from their families, and where they are raised and build social capital.

This is a clear indication that there is a lot of work ahead.

Hopefully, this is the place where I have met many such advocates who I can partner with, to move this goal ahead. I'm grateful for the people I've met here, including Colleen and Jaime, and everything I've learned.

I don't feel alone, and now I feel like I can rely on good intent of so many fellow parents who traverse this journey in with the same position. Thank you.

OMAR ABUSADA: My name is Omar. Thank you, Colleen, for helping me and thank you, Jaime, for helping me and my disability is like to help everyone here and I, all my friends are nice here,
and helping me with everything. Thank you.

COLLEEN MCLAUGHLIN: Thanks, all of you. Give them a round of applause.

I'd now like to invite the next group to come up as they describe how Partners in Policymaking has impacted their life, their ability to advocate for themselves, their ability to advocate for families and others with disabilities.

Dinah Braude-Kremberg, Sonia Kelleher, Jaclyn Greenberg, Monica Schrank, Teri Boyd, and Subhodeep Chakrabarty.

DINAH BRAUDE-KREMBERG: Good morning. I want to begin with a-- my name is Dinah Brody Kremlin. Thanks. I want to begin with a story which you may have heard that has made an impression on me.

Once upon a time there was a man who used to go to the ocean to do his writing. He had a habit of walking on the beach every morning before he began his work. Early one morning, he was walking along the shore after a big storm had passed and found the vast beach littered with starfish as far as the eye could see, stretching in both directions. Off in the distance, the man noticed a small boy approaching. As the boy walked, he paused every so often, and as he grew closer the man could see that he occasionally was bending down to pick up an object and throw it into the sea.

The boy came closer still, and the man called out, “Good morning. May I ask what it is that you're doing?” The young boy paused, looked up, and replied, “throwing starfish into the ocean. The tide had washed them up on the beach, and they can't return to the sea by themselves,” the youth replied. “When the sun gets high, they will die unless I throw them back into the water.”

The man replied, “But there must be tens of thousands of starfish on this beach. I'm afraid you won't really be able to make much of a difference.”

The boy bent down, picked up yet another starfish, and threw it as far as he could into the ocean. Then he turned, smiled, and said, “It made a difference to that one.”

We all have the opportunity to help people create positive change. But if you're like me, you may sometimes think, how much of a difference can I really make? Based on the starfish story, I believe that making a difference even in one life, counts for more than we can imagine, and we all have the power to do so.

When I first applied to New Jersey Partners, I had no idea about what to expect. I knew that COVID had disrupted my life in the world, and that I needed to reconnect with people and continue to learn about people with disabilities, that being my career and my lifelong interest.

I thought that this program would be the vehicle for doing so and create some order to my disordered life. It exceeded my expectations in ways I could not predict. I shared my story and listened to those of my colleagues. I was touched in ways I hadn't anticipated.

We all share similar hopes and dreams for our children, and when that is thwarted, we suffer individually and collectively. I learned that advocacy need not be adversarial, as my experience had been. It can be delivered without acrimony.

I was so impressed with, and inspired by, the courage of the people with disabilities who shared their first-hand accounts of discrimination socially, educationally, medically, and legally. I have, and will continue to advocate for students with disabilities who are often excluded from participating in the Gen. Ed. setting and participating in extracurricular activities.

I will continue to teach others about the value of modifications and accommodations in order to level the playing field in educational settings. I will continue to advocate for students who, to be educated in the least restrictive setting, and try to reduce the stigma associated with those who have IEPs. It's through education and inclusive practices at an early age that we can advocate for the disabled.

My sincere thanks to Colleen and Jaime for their guidance, availability, responsibility, support, facilitation of the program, and their display of their humanity.

Connection to others is what I had hoped to gain connection to others is what I got in so many ways.

Participation in New Jersey Partners has made me a better person. Thank you.

SONIA KELLEHER: Hi. My name is Sonia Kelleher. Partners in Policymaking has been a wonderful opportunity for growth.

It increased my knowledge, my skills, and my confidence in advocating for my family and others with disabilities. It challenged me to speak in front of others which has always been difficult for me. It opened up my mind to new issues, new ideas, and new strategies. And I learned about new tools to use when approaching an issue, assessing it, and creating a more effective action plan.

The 3 most significant impacts were: learning about the history of advocates who came before me, and being inspired to collaborate with others and get involved to make positive change; lessening the feeling of being isolated or alone when experiencing the various issues that individuals with disabilities and families with disabilities encounter. Partners provided many resources and pathways for addressing many of these issues.

And, thirdly, the most important, and impactful, and greatest source of strength and encouragement came from engaging, networking, and collaborating with my remarkable fellow graduates.

I'm sorry.

They have inspired me the most. I always wanted to make a difference, and because of Partners in Policymaking, I now believe I can.

And again, this is my issue with talking in front of people. Thank you.

JACLYN GREENBERG: Okay. Can you hear me? Okay.

Hi. I am Jaclyn Greenberg. I live in Morris County, and I am here with my family who's sitting over there. I'd like to start by thanking them for always supporting me and my advocacy. It means everything to me.

So I'm supposed to talk about how this program impacted my life and my ability to advocate, and I think for me it was just learning about disability history. So, during one-- I mean it's already been spoken about quite a bit earlier by some of, Dr. Spitalnik and Colleen-- but you know, during one of our first sessions we heard about the history of disability law.

We learned about Thomas Jefferson and his sister Elizabeth, who had a disability, and how his experiences with his sister impacted our human rights.

We heard from Sue Swenson, and we learned about her son, who had disabilities, and how she wanted him to be equally included. Her presentation really resonated with me-- how her beliefs pushed her to work at the White House, and to make life better for all people like her son.

We later learned about the recently-deceased Judy Heumann. We heard from Emily Ladau. And the changes that they made in the disability community.

These presentations taught me that the laws were, and continue to be created and shaped by people like all of us, by people like me, someone who loves someone with disabilities or by someone who has disabilities.

And then I connected with the members of my class. I heard about their stories. I heard about the graduates who came before us, people who have different challenges, but similar struggles.
People who want to affect change.

My time in these Partners classes made me realize that we are the change makers. We're the ones who know what should be, and we're the ones who know what's missing.

I also learned, as Abbey mentioned earlier, that I can't do it alone. I'm not alone. We're not alone.

I tend to have a big mouth when it comes to my children. It doesn't always serve me well. So, I've learned that by working with other members of my class, the people who presented, that the next time I’m frustrated with the situation, I’ll think about the connections I've made here, and I’ll think about who I can reach out to for support.

We all have a common goal, and by working together we stand a much better chance of making a difference. Thanks.

MONICA SCHRANK: It's always hard to go after the writer.

Hi! Good morning, everyone. My name is Monica Schrank. Thank you to my family for being here today, and also Brie and Erin, who are in the back of the room and inspired me to be here today. They are—I’ve met them through our children's disabilities, and they've become lifelong friends of mine, and I’m so grateful for them and all their support, and for encouraging me to join this program.

So, I think I rewrote this like 4 different times. So, I apologize if I’m all over the place.

But really, the most, the biggest thing I've gotten out of this program is just the input from this group and their stories, and that will really inspire me as I continue to have a cave for my son and other children.

They've helped me strengthen my voice, even though it is a little shaky right now.

And it really is so important just to tell your story and those stories of other people with disabilities. And it really can be impactful, as Sandy had mentioned with her story with the legislators.

I've learned that this is a marathon, not a sprint, and that it's okay to give yourself some grace and take a step back if you need to to reset. Let other people take the baton for a little bit.

And to make sure the people in the disabled community are represented. If they're not there. Why? And what can we do to get them there and make sure we're hearing them, and not just doing what we want to do, but doing what the people that need the services and support are are looking to get and amplify their voices.

And then I think most important that, when people come together and collaborate, great things can be done. And you can-- there's always a way to get to yes, you just have to get people on board, and the more people that come along with you, the easier that is to do.

And I’m just looking forward to celebrating this group's future wins, and seeing all the amazing advocacy work to come from this group.

Thank you to Colleen and Jaime and thank you to the class.

TERI BOYD: Hello! I'm Teri Boyd, and thank all of you for being here. Thank my daughter Esther, for getting up and ensuring that I got here on time, and my husband, Sasha over there for everything else.

How has Partners in Policy impacted my life?

I would have to say, my brain and my heart are just bigger. To the brain, just as everyone has already said, learned so much, and I've learned how much more I have to learn which opens the doors, and just has made me more curious to ensure that I do to better prepare myself for what may come in the future.

One thing that all of the speakers that we saw, that all of them said, relationships.

Now, on to my heart. The most-- I'm not necessarily choking up, trying to read my notes-- to the heart. Everything that happened after the classes. We were always told to hang out and talk to each other and learn from each other.

And I have to say, I can't imagine what it was like for the other classes to only do this on Zoom, because, as we got together after the class over a glass of wine and just talking and sharing our personal stories. It just becomes the most important thing. The relationships that we've built, and we'll and know that they will continue to grow.

I'm just honored, and I admire so much, all of you and the impacts that you've left on my life and things that I've learned, from creative ways of rewriting our kids IEPs and ensuring that they are written the way for specific children.

And also learning from classmates how to be nice when necessary, or sometimes not, in dealing with medical staff when they just don't get it, and are not being helpful.

Personal stories that we've shared, and I just want to thank all of you for trusting me with your personal situations and things that we have shared.

And also, you know, we shared possible job opportunities as well as good TV series that we all need to ensure to watch and you Law and Order people, you know who you are.

I just want to say to my class, you know I’m not going to say I'll never forget you, because I’m sure we will all be working with each other in the future. And just again, thank you so much for growing what we learned up until last night-- our social capital.

Thank you.

SUBHODEEP CHAKRABARTY: Good morning Partners graduates, and families. My name is Subhodeep, and I'm currently a graduate student at Rider University.

“There is no greater disability in society than the inability to see a person as more,” said Robert M. Hansel.

Disability advocates went to Washington to get rights in 1990, and we continue today in 2023 to try and fight for inclusion and equality in our schools and communities.

Today, there is technology and resources to help people with disabilities achieve goals and be successful, and Partners teaches you to be an advocate and fight for what is right.

Everyone in this room has a story.

My senior year, I was in my last IEP meeting before graduation, and I was told that I didn't have what it takes to go to a four-year college.

And when I went to visit Hofstra, the Disability Coordinator was reluctant to give me admission or help. She didn't think that I’d be able to in class at Hofstra. I remember driving with my parents and my brother all the way to Long Island are excited. And she told me that, “well, all these classes are special needs classes. You don't have any-- enough mainstream classes on the transcript. I don't think I could give you admission.”

But I knew personally, I didn't want to give up on my dreams and goals. I knew I wanted to pursue a college degree.

Another quote wanted to mention is, “Silence is the last thing you'll hear from me,” said Marlee Matlin. This course inspired me to continue to be a voice and advocate, to not be silent, and fight for the resources and use the networks that we have gained from being a Partner's participant. I feel inspired, like everyone else, to create policy changes and institutional changes in policy so, as a State we can continue to be a champion for disability communities.

With the support of my parents and college professors. I graduated from Rutgers. And it doesn't matter that it took 6 years. It takes whatever time that it will take, but that doesn't mean you stop someone from dreaming.

Like I mentioned earlier, I am currently working on a master's degree. I am not stopping.

And parents in this room-- continue to advocate in IEP meetings, because the professionals in the meetings-- they sometimes don't suggest the right thing, or they do the very minimum required by law just to get through.

If I knew earlier in the high school that I had a voice, I probably would have been advocating like crazy. But thankfully, now I know by being an advocate in college, and being determined to communicate with my professors and disability services in the learning center that if you want something you can get it.

Finally, I want to say thank you to everyone here, and special thanks to Subha Aunty, who is a policy alumni, who recommended this program to me. She is in the back. So, thank you Subha Aunty.

Thank you, Jaime, and I just made amazing friends like Parul. So, in this whole room like it's some of-- all of you are now friends that I have for support. When I want to build policy changes, I have people who we can collaborate, like everyone's saying today, the theme of today is collaboration, and that's something that I feel confident that I can now do.

And again, I want to thank my parents for continuing to be an advocate, and supporting whatever resources I needed in college at the University of Scranton and at Rutgers, because, without their support, financially and without their support, with finding resources, I probably wouldn't have been where I am today.

And just to reiterate, I'll cherish all the memories and connections I have made in this class, and everyone's unique stories will continue to resonate with me, and it will help me continue to do this great work.

Congratulations to all the graduates of Partners. Let's continue to be leaders in policymaking and in public schools and universities. Let's change the system together. We have what it takes. We are a powerful force if we all work together. Thank you, and once again thank you.

COLLEEN MCLAUGHLIN: Thank you all. Well. now give them a round of applause.

Well, you'd think Subhodeep would be wrapping us up because it was such a compelling. But it's not-- now we have one more group to go. But last, but certainly not at least the next group will share how they've engaged in advocacy throughout the year.

We's like to welcome up Jesse Schwartzman, Zoufishan Din, Ashley Soleau, Rathnaponni Sudalaimuthu, Luisa Chastel Messner.

JESSE SCHWARTZMAN: Hi. My name is Jessie. Thank you guys so much for coming. This is a big crowd. This is pretty cool. Thank you, Colleen. Thank you, Jaime. Thank you out of the Council. Thank you so much for advocating and having me here and definitely being a part of.

So the type of advocacy work that I've done this past year is definitely just focusing on submitting testimony.

And it's something that's just super important to get your words out. Get the personal story out to really talk about your experience. Talk about your background. I have done this in regards to policy, on helping people with jobs, housing, healthcare. It's just something very, very important, and to get other people to get involved.

And something I've also done is, I have started a podcast to have people talk about their experiences, talk about their backgrounds, talk about the wins, talk about things that they have or haven't done. So, if you're interested in being a part of the podcast, definitely let me know after.

And I've also held a Zoom meeting to get more people involved about politics.

It's very important that we have to be at the table by just speaking at it, and showing up to different events. That something that's definitely important, because if we're not there, then they don't get our feedback. They don't get what we have to say.

And then I've also participated in a lot of different groups. So, I’m a part of a lot of different groups, so many of the count. So, what I would definitely say is, definitely get involved, definitely take that opportunity to collaborate and to talk with others, and it's definitely a great opportunity, and so don't give up it.

It takes time. It takes decades, possibly, or years. Just don't give up, keep pushing, and definitely keep advocating. Thank you guys.

ZOUFISHAN DIN: Thank you. Hello, everyone. My name is Zoufishan Din and I’m here because my son diagnosed with autism 17 years ago and my journey begins with, starts with this diagnosis.

Finding resources and assessing services was a long-waited and overwhelming procedure for me, so I decided to came forward and advocate for myself, my son, and parents like me.

I would like to say thank you to Partners in Policymaking for giving me this opportunity to learn the policy making procedure and teach us how we we can make an impact on policymaking.

So, I learned a lot in this program, and I as an advocate this year, involved myself, and I’m so proud of myself, too.

I, as an advocate this year, involved myself along with other advocates through Arc and other care agencies, signing petitions, sending emails and messages to the members of Congress to make sure they don't forget the peoples with disabilities and support network behind them, as they consider future legislation.

I also joined the rally in Washington, DC on February 28 for making childcare and long-term care for people with disabilities more simple, and accessible, expand, and make sure, more easy access to community based and home based services, paid leave for the family caregivers and parents, and easy access to affordable childcare for all families.

This is the most hard thing I faced, and I see other people, parents face this problem, that it's not very affordable when you go for the free services. And it became overwhelming to find free services. And it, if you find period paid services, it's not affordable. So, it's very important to have easy access to affordable childcare for all families.

Process of getting services must be simplified, not overwhelming, and no long wait for this, because, as someone has said, and I like that quote, and I will like to share it here, “Care can't wait.” And I believe in that.

This touched my heart. So, I want to say at the end, that care can't wait. The procedure for getting services must be simplified. Thank you so much.

ASHLEY SOLEAU: Hi! Good morning. I'm Ashley Soleau. I'd like to say thank you for my husband, who's here today, and also Suba, who really is the reason I’m here today. I wouldn't have ever known about this program if it weren't for her. So, thank you.

So, I want to say I'm very grateful for the opportunity to partake in this life changing program. But when I applied for the New Jersey Partners in Policymaking program, I knew I wanted to become a disability advocate, but I needed a starting point, or at least I thought I needed a starting point.
Throughout the course of this program, I've actually been able to see just how much advocacy has been a part of my life, even without me realizing it.

A little over a year ago, my youngest son was diagnosed with Duchenne muscular dystrophy. And his diagnosis, at the time I thought, was like the kickstart getting this advocacy gear in my brain grinding. But when I look back I realize, my advocacy Journey really started at 2020 with his birth, because it was at that point, as he was progressing that we were noticing things were not going the way we we're expecting them to, and it took many, many months, I mean 6 months to his ultimate diagnosis at 18 months to find the right doctors and get the right care, and finally get the right diagnosis. So, little did I know those steps were already building the foundation of my own advocacy work.

I feel like from there I moved on to educating myself, my family, our greater village. Childcare, anyone involved in his care about his needs, about the disease.

I've gone on to speaking out in public spaces and sharing my story-- whether that's through social media, other support groups that I've joined since getting his diagnosis. And also setting up opportunities for my son’s teachers, caregivers, and therapists, to meet with treatment experts in the field of Duchenne muscular dystrophy.

So, my point in bringing all that up is to say, that advocacy can mean different things to different people. For me, at this point, it's been about getting a handle on the systems that my child needs to navigate, and that I need to navigate in order to ensure that he's getting the proper services and care. So, whether that's daycare, early intervention, special education, the IEP Process, the list goes on.

So, I would just like to say that, as a result of this program, I know that I can affect change, and I know that no impact is too small. So, I'm looking forward to continuing my advocacy journey.

My most recent stop along the way was reaching out to federal legislators to ensure that there'll be continued funding for the research for Duchenne muscular dystrophy, so that we can continue to set care standards and hopefully find a cure for this terrible disease.

So, you know I'm here, I’m doing the work. I'm so grateful for this opportunity, and I wanted to say thank you to Colleen and Jaime. and thank you to this inspiring group of people that I got to meet and learn from. So, thank you all.

RATHNAPONNI SUDALAIMUTHU: Good morning, everyone. I'm Rathnaponni Sudalaimuthu. I started my advocacy for my son V. J. We're sitting at the back. Thank you for his patience. And I'm continuing to do for him.

I'm also slowly extending my advocacy to my friends, colleagues, neighbors, and more of important, I should say, the social media friends who need support in IEP meeting, and a lot more. This brings a benefit for me as well as for them.

One example I like to quote-- recently a stranger from social media was looking for a support for her son's IEP meeting. She lives in Chicago. I contacted her. I gave my suggestion, and able to support virtually in her son's IEP meeting. Now she became a good friend of mine.

Similarly, I like to increase the awareness, advocate, educate, and improve the life of the disabilities by bringing this awareness for the family and friends who support this disabled community.

And I take this opportunity to thank Colleen and Jaime for all the support throughout the program and wish good luck for all my fellow Partners who are graduating today.

Last, but not the least. I like to quote my vision here. When majority cares for the minority and the minority works together with the majority, we all win. Thank you.

LOUISA CASTEL MESSNER: Hello, everyone. My name is Louisa. I'm really grateful for the opportunity to come. I meet everyone here. It's been 8 months and I have been really motivated and passionate about education for deaf children. I would like to gain the ability for more teachers of the deaf within the education system and for our community.

I would like to let you know that the development in the deaf education system regarding advocacy and different events, different workshops, conferences, I've been going to them to learn about our best practices within the field.

And I want to make sure that my work to advocate to increase the pool of teachers of the deaf, and to have awareness and accessibility for education for deaf children. I share my experience, and I've already seen and witnessed others and it is a challenge that we face for and with deaf students.

In addition, working with the schools, teachers of the deaf educators, to make sure that we develop policies to accommodate those students within education and having the resources for the Deaf community.

At this time, I've been working as an advocate with different organizations and agencies within the Deaf community. I've been really working to work with after school activity programs with the goal to have role models for emotional learning and support within the deaf children with the bill at 192, and that advocates to help grow and strengthen emotional, educational, and personal development, and that is definitely very important within education.

There's a lot of work still need to be done, and my commitment to work, to make sure that deaf children have access and resources and the supports that they need, and their success as well.

So, thank you for your time and congratulations to all the graduates of 2023.

COLLEEN MCLAUGHLIN: Thank you so much to all of us for inspiring us with the work you're doing to create lasting change. Let's give them all a round of applause.