

## From the Executive Director

Hello TNSTEP community:

Happy New Year! Yes, 2024 is here, and, here at TNSTEP we're gearing up for a busy time as families and students across Tennessee return to school. We hope you will visit us (and bookmark) our new web location - [www.tnstep.info](http://www.tnstep.info) - where we will continue to provide accurate, timely, and relevant information to assist you on your journey for education services and support that can lead to the best possible outcomes for our children and youth.

Our Team has expanded in the last few months, and a page of this Winter Newsletter is devoted to us introducing our new staff, a talented and diverse group of individuals who are dedicated, like the rest of our crew, to serving Tennessee's children, youth, and families that experience disabilities. In the remaining pages there are articles on our state's laws and policies related to bullying, some thoughts on belonging and working toward more welcoming and supportive communities, and a statement of personal philosophy from one of our 2023 SUTP Youth Council members. As always, if you have questions or need additional information about any of these topics, please feel free to reach out to us - it's what we're here for!

A new year brings new goals and initiatives, and we look forward to continuing to provide the best services and resources for our community. If there are issues or topics related to special education support and services that are impacting your own efforts to successfully navigate your child's or your own education, please alert us and we will do our best to address them. We love hearing from you throughout the year, so please tell us what you like or have found beneficial about our work, or what we can do to improve your experiences.

Gratefully,  
Karen Harrison



## ON BELONGING: CREATING A MORE WELCOMING AND SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITY

by Ned Andrew Solomon, Communications Support, TNSTEP

As parents, particularly of kids with developmental and intellectual disabilities, we want a few basic things: that our children be safe, healthy, and happy. That even after we're gone someone will continue to love and support them. That despite their challenges and limitations, they grow up to become fully-functioning adults, and that whatever accommodations are needed are in place to ensure their success. And, above all, that they belong, that they have found their "tribe," that the people in their lives accept them for who they are.

This shouldn't be a tall order; a huge ask. But it is.

A few years ago, Erik Carter, a former researcher at the Vanderbilt Kennedy Center and now at Baylor University in Waco, Texas, embarked on an initiative to define what belonging means. Through that intensive work, Carter and his research assistants came up with a definition of belonging that was comprised of ten elements: to be present, invited, welcomed, present, known, accepted, involved, supported, heard, befriended, and needed.



Furthermore, Carter and his team state that, "**exclusion** means there is no participation; **segregation** means the individual is in their own group, but outside the circle; **integration** means they're inside the circle, but in a cluster by themselves; **inclusion** means the individuals are scattered singly throughout the circle; but **belonging** means **total integration**. The individual is completely in the circle, plus a part of small clusters just outside the circle that have members of both groups."

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## MEET THE NEW TNSTEP STAFF MEMBERS



### **Bernadette Gray - Family & Youth Education Specialist**

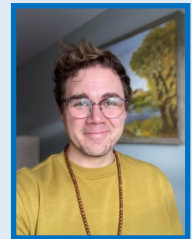
“I have been attracted to TNSTEP for 15 years. This bond was cemented at the attendance of a Basic Rights Workshop and continued to strengthen as I gained more knowledge and confidence to advocate for the educational needs of our daughter on the autism spectrum.”

Bernadette took the relationship to another level when she became a Board member and eventually the Board Chairman. “The significance and value of TNSTEP still ring true in our lives as our daughter now faces her transition years. I am thrilled at the opportunity to come full circle and help families directly as a Family and Youth Education Specialist, as I was helped.”

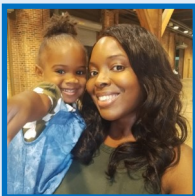
Bernadette’s diverse resume reveals years of expertise developed in the chemical and transportation industries, including strategic planning, process improvement, customer experience, and data analytics. As a lifelong volunteer, Bernadette has honed her leadership, organization, and communication skills. “My church experiences gave me the platform to interact with families, youth and young adults. My strongest quality, evident throughout my life, can be summed up as a servant leader.”

### **Sheridan Smith - Strategic Growth Manager**

“I was drawn to TNSTEP because of a long history in my family of working with individuals with disabilities. My mother spent 30 years working for an organization that ran numerous programs and houses to facilitate the self-directed and full lives of individuals with disabilities, and it was a strong part of my family life. When I saw an application for an organization that was supporting children and youth and their families, I was excited to support their work in whatever way I could.”



In 2019, Sheridan helped to start Jamestown, New York’s first LGBTQ+ Pride organization and first region-wide Pride festival. During this project, Sheridan learned about the structure and support organizations need to start, grow, and accomplish goals. At that point, Sheridan began a career as a nonprofit consultant and has since become a licensed therapist. “Working with TNSTEP allows me to look at systems and processes which support the work that we do. Over the last few weeks I have had one-on-one discussions with the staff, and this has only given me more hope and passion for TNSTEP.”



### **Katherine Williams - Director of West TN Services**

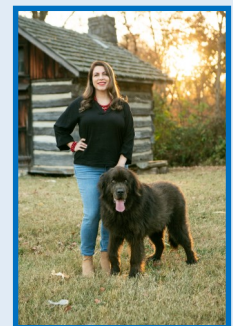
“TNSTEP initially drew me in with its strong emphasis on family support and dedication to helping others in the special education field.” Katherine has Master’s Degrees in Science and Early Childhood Special Education. Since March 2016, she has been an Education Specialist with the U.S. Department of Defense.

Katherine excels in providing guidance and support to families. She has worked in the special education field in three different countries. “I am deeply passionate about early childhood education. I hope to be an asset to TNSTEP by contributing to the organization’s goals and values.”

### **Tanya Willis - Director of Development**

“When I first heard about TNSTEP, I was in awe, wishing that I had known about their services when I had to advocate for my daughter while she was attending traditional school. I was immediately drawn to TNSTEP because of the staff’s dedication to empowering others and being a voice for the disabled community as a whole. When given the chance to walk with the TNSTEP team to help others, I jumped at the opportunity!”

Tanya is passionate about empowering others to advocate for themselves. She enjoys fundraising, which she hopes will give the TNSTEP team support to positively impact even more families across the state. “When I’m not building relationships and meeting with funders, I spend my time volunteering to help rescued dogs and farm animals, growing fresh garlic on my farm, or reading a good book on the porch swing.”



## NEVER GIVING UP: A PERSONAL PHILOSOPHY by John Richerson, SUTP\* 2023 Youth Council Member

I remember a few quotes from Lego Ninjago: "I'll do what I can, but it won't be easy." "Without the risk they'll never know how far they'll truly go." "Don't be afraid to fail." "Sometimes the greatest opponent we face is ourselves." "Ninja never quit."

I love hard work. I will never give up.

My dream is to become an electrician, a CNC (a manufacturing machine) operator, a welder, a metal fabricator, a gunsmith, a kinetic vulnerability engineer, a 3D printer operator, and a hunter. However, due to my disabilities, I will have to face many challenges to have a chance to get the education to do any part of my dream.



Unfortunately, I cannot go to the necessary college or university to learn what I need to do to become what I aspire to be. Because of my disability-based diploma from high school, I will not be able to go to most college programs. And I will have obstacles getting accepted by trade schools. Even so, I am not willing to give up on my dream. This revelation inspires me to better myself.

I am not just going to give up; I will work harder than ever to achieve my dreams.

My favorite show, *Power Rangers*, gives me another quote: "Rangers forever; never surrender." That tells me never to give up no matter how hard it seems. I am never going to give up on making my dreams a reality. I am not going to place mental restrictions or mental limits on my goals. I know that the phrase, "I can't," limits what you can do.

I will double my efforts and then double them again and again until I reach my goals. I hope to surpass all my limitations several times over. I declare that I will not let my disabilities get in my way! I am stronger than my disabilities and limitations. I will do the best I possibly can at my jobs and school programs. I will prevail at anything I set my mind to; I promise myself that much.

I will be like the phoenix rising up after every fall and burning brighter after each time I fail.

Yes, I may be afraid of failing - in fact I am terrified of not reaching my goals! However fear welcomes in and blossoms valor in someone's life. I have got to learn to control my fear and turn it into a tool for my victory, as the quote from Ninjago's Sensei Wu says, "Iron sharpens iron." It means to work hard and refine your mistakes into triumph. And a quote from Grandmaster Yoda of Star Wars: "You either do or do not; there is no try," By only trying to accomplish something you are mentally blocking or limiting yourself to a mere fraction of your potential. If you only try, then you have little if any faith in accomplishing the task.

Here are a few more of my favorite, inspirational quotes from my Lego heroes: "Never put off till tomorrow what can be done today." "Is it impossible, or are we only confined to the walls we build ourselves?" "Failure is often temporary; it can be corrected, and with effort, it can even be reversed." "Even lessons learned the hard way are lessons learned."

I will use this knowledge to prevail at any goal I put my mind to. I love hard work, and I will never give up.

*\*SUTP, or STEP Up to the Plate, is a TNSTEP youth leadership initiative. John Richerson and four other youth leaders participated in and contributed to the SUTP 2023 Youth Council, which met June through December. These meetings provided group growth activities on important topics, like Learning to Speak Up, Adulthood, Building Your Community, and Services and Resources for Transition-Age Youth. Youth Council Members were also given one-on-one opportunities for personal enhancement and transferable skills development. Best of all, participating youth had the chance to talk about their hopes, dreams, and challenges, network with other youth facing similar issues, earn stipends for participating, and learn from the TNSTEP Adult Advisors.*



## ON BELONGING

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For years, the disability community has held up the concept of “inclusion” as our primary goal. But there is a place beyond inclusion - and it is belonging. Not just included, but seen as an indispensable and cherished member of the group.

Here are Carter’s ten components of belonging, defined:

**Invited** “To have your presence or participation sought out by another person.” (Examples: Joining a group, a club, a birthday party, or sitting with peers for lunch.)

**Welcomed** “To be received by others with warmth, friendliness, delight.”

**Present** “To be involved every day in the same places as everyone else in your school.” (Side note: One of the major components of Tennessee’s Post-Secondary Programs for Students with IDD is that the participants are intentionally and actively involved in all aspects of campus life, not just the scholastic ones.)

**Known** “To be seen as a unique individual and appreciated for all of who you are.”

**Accepted** “To be embraced gladly without condition, and viewed as an equal.”

**Involved** “To be actively engaged with and alongside peers, in shared learning and with common goals.” (Carter offers a simple classroom strategy: designing activities that promote peer-to-peer discussion.)

**Supported** “Having the individualized resources needed to reach one’s full potential, and to thrive in everyday life.”

**Heard** “Your perspective is sought, listened to, and respected.” (Side note: Students with verbal challenges need to have a way to communicate so they are “heard,” and so they can contribute to meaningful conversations and help make decisions.)

**Befriended** “Having peer relationships marked by mutual affection and reciprocity.”

**Needed** “Being valued by others and being an indispensable member of the community.”

As my wife and the executive director of Empower Tennessee, Gina Lynette, likes to say: “Belonging means being missed when you’re not there.”

Carter believes that students perform best when they feel a sense of belonging in school. It’s not rocket science. It could be as simple as a warm “hello!” from the classroom teacher when a student walks through the door. “Educators have the power to ensure that all students with disabilities are included in the general ed classroom, and that they are participating at every level. Belonging is a key component in improving academic, social, and behavioral outcomes for all students with disabilities. Providing opportunities for friendships to bloom may be the greatest way to promote belonging.”

“*Creating Communities of Belonging for Students with Significant Cognitive Disabilities*” by Erik Carter and Elizabeth Biggs can be found at [tiescenter.org](https://tiescenter.org). This article provides 10 mini-guides for each of the 10 belonging components mentioned.

Do you have an inspiring story about belonging that you’ve experienced or observed? If so, please send your idea to [mystory@tnstep.info](mailto:mystory@tnstep.info) for possible inclusion in an upcoming TNSTEP Newsletter.



## TENNESSEE ANTI-BULLYING LAWS AND POLICIES

Over the years, TNSTEP staff have met with, and held trainings for, hundreds of students with disabilities throughout Tennessee. We were privy to frank discussions about the students' challenges, and a too-common theme that surfaced was the constant reality of bullying. Of course, bullying is not a new problem for any school-age child, but there is no doubt that children with disabilities - often seen as different and "less than" - are most frequently the victims of verbal and physical abuse from their peers. To make matters worse, the prevalence of youth who are active on social media has made cyberbullying its own major problem.

One would have to assume that there are many more cases than reported, due to a student's fear that reporting a bully or bullying episode could result in even more mistreatment. The reality is, a significant percentage of calls from families to TNSTEP staff members identify bullying as a major impediment to their child's education experience.

We wanted our readers to know that Tennessee has information and resources available, and that there are anti-bullying laws and regulations on the books. The state has developed the following definitions of harassment, intimidation, bullying, and cyberbullying: "Harassment, intimidation or bullying means any act that substantially interferes with a student's educational benefits, opportunities, or performance; and if the act takes place on school grounds, at any school-sponsored activity, on school-provided equipment or transportation, or at any official school bus stop, the act has the effect of physically harming a student or damaging a student's property; knowingly placing a student or students in reasonable fear of physical harm to the student or damage to the student's property; causing emotional distress to a student or students; or creating a hostile educational environment." In addition, "Cyberbullying means bullying undertaken through the use of electronic devices." Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-6-4502 (2011)

According to the state, Tennessee school districts are required to adopt a policy prohibiting bullying, cyberbullying, harassment, or intimidation. District policies must contain key policy and procedural elements, including, but not limited to, statements prohibiting harassment, intimidation, bullying, or cyberbullying; procedures for reporting and investigations; disciplinary consequences for policy violation; statements prohibiting reprisal and retaliation; and procedures for referring students to counseling and support services.

Additionally, Tennessee school districts must provide training to teachers and counselors regarding these policies and undergo appropriate procedures relative to policy implementation. Importantly, Tennessee school districts are encouraged to develop policies in consultation with parents, school employees, students, and other members of the school community. School principals must also immediately inform parents or legal guardians when a student is involved in an act of harassment, intimidation, bullying, or cyberbullying, and must inform parents about the availability of counseling and support services.

*For more information about our state's anti-bullying laws and policies, as well as tips for responding to bullying situations, visit the Tennessee Department of Education's "Bullying and Harassment" webpage at [bit.ly/3Hu1sGa](http://bit.ly/3Hu1sGa)*

***Note: If you have informed your school of a bullying incident and not seen action, let TNSTEP share with you how to use resources like the GEBSER letter. Connect with a team member today for assistance with this important topic, which may be interfering with a student's ability to receive a free and appropriate education.***



**YOUTH LEADERSHIP ACADEMY (YLA) 2024**  
**SAVE THE DATE: JUNE 11-13**  
**FOR YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES, AGES 16-24; FREE TO ATTEND**  
**THE APPLICATION IS HERE: [bit.ly/ETYLAA24](https://bit.ly/ETYLAA24) OR USE THE QR CODE TO THE RIGHT**  
**APPLICATION DEADLINE IS FRIDAY, MAY 17**



**CONNECT WITH TNSTEP!**  
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