

# Wayne Parker Advocate of the Year Recipients

**Tracy Bock**

**2025**



With over a decade of partnership with TNSTEP, Tracy has empowered families to understand their special education rights and access the services they need. Her compassionate approach and commitment to collaboration have guided countless families toward better outcomes.

TNSTEP is delighted to present Tracy Bock with the 2024 Wayne Parker Advocate of the Year Award.



# Wayne Parker Advocate of the Year Recipients

## Ericka Barrett

2022



Ericka Barrett deserves this recognition because she is a Metro Nashville Public Schools school social worker. In her position, she has been working in underserved communities. Not to include schools where the majority of students are black and brown. She has displayed her skills to advocate for mental health services for students who have experienced trauma by providing individual services or group sessions. She has a son with Angelman Syndrome, which was the reason why she chose social work in the first place. With this diagnosis, she could advocate firsthand for school services for children with disabilities while supporting the families and bridging the gap between education and home. Ericka is a product of her environment. She is a native of Nashville, and through advocacy, she has worked to become an active member of DDIC, CBSW, and ASF, as well as on the leadership team of her department. In addition, Ericka is an encouraging spiritual advisor and consultant. Although she wears the hat as a social worker, she is a mother of three and a wife.

TNSTEP is delighted to present Ericka Barrett with the Wayne Parker Advocate of the Year Award.



# Wayne Parker Advocate of the Year Recipients

## LaShaunda Massey

## 2021



We are thrilled to announce LaShaunda Massey as one of our two **2022 Wayne Parker Advocate of the Year** recipients. We are so inspired by LaShaunda's incredible passion for her sons, her community, and disability advocacy. We'd like to tell you a little about her.

LaShaunda's son, Eric, experienced challenges in school. On the autism spectrum and with significant sensory issues, Eric found learning difficult in a noisy and too-brightly-lit environment. Unfortunately, the best solution the school could offer was to put Eric's desk out in the hallway, sequestering him from his classmates. Since that wasn't an appropriate solution, his mom, LaShaunda Massey, decided to homeschool her child. She continued to take on that responsibility through Eric's high school graduation while working full time.

LaShaunda realized that educating Eric at home solved one problem, but it was still cutting him off from his peers and community. She fervently sought out opportunities for Eric to participate in educational activities and sports, including football and Eric's favorite, swimming. She encouraged him to join the Special Olympics, where he's thrived athletically and socially. "With her encouragement, Eric soon took on a leadership role, becoming an International Health Messenger for Special Olympics," said Brian Poindexter, who nominated LaShaunda for this award.

LaShaunda joined the Special Olympics Tennessee Board, contributing her extensive advocacy skills for promoting inclusion and mental health for the athletes and their loved ones. She has also challenged Eric to swim competitively in high school and in a competitive local swim club. Brian said, "LaShaunda has done everything in her power to prepare Eric to succeed in life and has built a strong support system around him."

In addition to being an amazing Mom and advocate, LaShaunda is a licensed clinical psychologist who specializes in childhood clinical issues, abuse/neglect, and depression/anxiety disorders. She is currently a consultant with Polished Consulting, LLC providing training in various leadership settings across the mid-south including with the Memphis-Shelby County Schools - MSCS and the City of Memphis.

It is our privilege to know you and witness the impact you make in the lives of others, LaShaunda! Keep up the great work!

The video of LaShaunda's award acceptance at The Arc Tennessee's awards banquet can be viewed here: : <https://youtu.be/gysVw54-HSI>

# Wayne Parker Advocate of the Year Recipients

## Tamara Tuckson

2021



TNSTEP is thrilled to announce Tamara Tuckson as one of our two "2022 Wayne Parker Advocate of the Year" recipients. Her advocacy journey started with her own daughter, but her determination, leadership, and willingness to educate quickly spilled over into her community where she has made an incredible impact. We'd like to you a little about her.

Tamara's 19-year-old daughter, McKenzie, is diagnosed with Rett's Syndrome. Children and adults with Rett Syndrome typically experience significant challenges, including the ability to breathe, eat, walk, and speak. Doctors told Tammy that McKenzie would not be able to communicate, understand, or follow simple directions.

Fortunately, that dire prognosis did not stop Tammy.

"Tammy decided not to give up," said Karria James, who nominated Tammy for this award. "Instead, she developed a holistic community of support around her family. Wherever there was a gap, she found someone willing to learn how to close it."

Today, McKenzie uses communication devices, successfully follows directions, feeds herself, and is physically active.

This success story took a great deal of time and perseverance. When McKenzie was assigned to a classroom with a teacher that didn't have the necessary skills, Tamara helped that teacher get trained on her daughter's needs. She applied the same effort to pediatricians, therapists, and pastors. Becoming an expert on Rett's and recognizing the benefit of advocating for her child, Tamara began helping others advocate for their children, who were sometimes referred to her by the teachers, doctors, and therapists who had witnessed Tamara's passion and determination.

"Tammy doesn't need this award to do what she does," said Karria. "Her family will continue to thrive, bringing their community along with them. Honoring her with this award would be a pat on her back, letting her know, 'we see you, and we're in this together.'"

Tamara, you are an inspiration to us all and so deserving of this recognition. Congrats, and keep up the GREAT work!

Video of Tamara receiving this award at The Arc Tennessee's events banquet can be viewed here: [https://youtu.be/pA\\_SHIEsGQ0](https://youtu.be/pA_SHIEsGQ0)



# Wayne Parker Advocate of the Year Recipients

## Jennifer Carpenter

2020



**Jennifer Carpenter**



The Wayne Parker STEP Advocate of the Year Award is presented each year to a person who has exemplified seeking and using the information to ensure a brighter future for children or youth with disabilities. The award is in memory of Wayne Parker, a former STEP team member who was a zealous advocate for the rights of children and families. He worked tirelessly to ensure that families had the information they needed to speak up and advocate for the needs of their children with disabilities. In true “Wayne” style, the recipient must also demonstrate teamwork and collaboration and the zeal to share the information they have learned with others.

This year’s STEP Advocate of the Year Award is presented to Jennifer Carpenter.

Mrs. Carpenter works for Blount County Schools in Maryville, TN as the Transition Case Manager for Heritage High School and William Blount High School. Mrs. Carpenter is also the parent of a child with a disability who graduated high school last year. She is always willing to share her knowledge and resources with families of students with disabilities. Jennifer is the leader of a team of four Transition Specialists. She and her Transition Team host an annual Disability Resource Fair for all of Blount County. This fair shares information on employment opportunities, post-secondary institutions, medical resources, legal resources, and camps for disabled students and young adults. In addition, high school students in the Comprehensive Developmental Classroom are involved in workplace readiness activities that Mrs. Carpenter and her team lead. Finally, Mrs. Carpenter and her team assist special education inclusion students with college applications, job applications, resume creation, and interview skills. Mrs. Carpenter has made a difference in the lives of numerous students with disabilities in Blount County, and for that, she is deserving of recognition.

Would you please join us as we congratulate Jennifer? She will receive her award in the mail very soon, along with a special gift package to recognize her amazing work.

Kim Reeves from Heritage High School in Maryville, TN, nominated Jennifer.

# Wayne Parker Advocate of the Year Recipients

## Garfield Adams

2020



**Garfield Adams**

In January 2018, Garfield Adams was hired as Special Education Director for Hamilton County Schools. He began by visiting every principal in the county and talking with parents. Based on what learned, Garfield worked with LifeLine and Chattanooga Inclusive Ed to build a three-year plan to reduce the segregation of special education students, eliminate cluster sites where students were segregated, and provide professional development to staff on disability-related topics and co-teaching. He has advocated for additional positions and succeeded in adding 10 more special education teachers and 30 additional paraprofessionals.

According to Award nominees Lisa Mattheiss and Trish Cox, Garfield has “created a trust with Hamilton County families and service organizations...He has invited ideas and collaboration and advocated internally and externally for the access of students with disabilities and the involvement of their families in the process.”



# Wayne Parker Advocate of the Year Recipients

## Dr. Cale Horne

2019



**Dr. Cale Horne**

Dr. Cale Horne, along with his wife Adrianna, is the parent of a child with autism. Shortly after getting involved in special education for his own child, Dr. Horne identified several areas where the school system was not meeting the needs of other children with disabilities. After further investigation, he determined that the deficits were ingrained throughout the system. In response, Dr. Horne formed the Chattanooga Inclusive Ed Working Group, which includes parents of children with disabilities, local secondary and post-secondary educators, non-profits, and the Chattanooga 2.0 organization that was comprised of local business leaders as well as Hamilton County Department of Education decision-makers.

According to one of his nominations, "His work through this group has benefited children with disabilities, their parents and guardians, educators, service providers and a host of local nonprofits that work with students with disabilities. There have been many changes in the local school system and the systems of adjacent counties because of Dr. Horne's efforts." From the impetus of his own family situation, Dr. Horne has created a community initiative that has positively impacted inclusion rates in Hamilton County. According to another of his nominations, "More students are now educated in their home-zoned schools and general education classrooms, due to Dr. Horne's quiet but persistent leadership."

# Wayne Parker Advocate of the Year Recipients

## Trish Cox

2018



**Trish Cox and  
Caelan**

Different things put people on the road to advocacy. For Trish Cox, this year's award recipient, all it took was a teacher telling her that her son Caelan would never be able to go to his local school, only a "special school for kids with significant disabilities".

That unintended initial spark ignited a fire that has only grown in intensity. Trish became a life-long learner, about her son's autism, her son and her family's educational rights, the IEP process, and the ways to reach for the best possible life for her child.

In her own words: "After a long summer of crying, and research, I decided that every child deserved to succeed, or fail, based on their experiences and not a projection made by a third party. Ultimately, it was not a tough decision to give him the opportunity to go to kindergarten with his peers and let him write his own story: twelve and a half years in a general education classroom."

With "every child" in mind, Trish learned how she could help others. She trained to be a Parent Mentor with LifeLine in 2009 and currently serves on its board, and was part of the launch team for the Chattanooga Autism Center.

Caelan, the child who – supposedly – would never be able to attend his local school, is now 18, a senior in high school graduating with a general education diploma, and a soon-to-be college student with plans to learn animation. He has a 3.5 GPA, and scored a 23 on the ACT his first attempt – a good enough score to attend MTSU in the fall. Through Trish's encouragement and his own perseverance, Caelan has developed social, soft and communication skills through networking with people in the community who offered him opportunities and support.

Delighted with his success, Trish is quick to spread the kudos around. After Caelan's diagnosis, his mom had the good fortune of encountering Lisa Mattheiss and Virginia Piper at LifeLine, who supported her through her earliest IEP meetings. According to Trish, Virginia gave her the best advice anyone has ever given her: "You need to go to a STEP class to educate yourself on your son's basic rights under IDEA, the federal special education law."

Trish drove two hours to take two classes with Karen Harrison, and reports that she's been a STEP participant and advocate ever since.

In her own words:

"Whenever I get the chance to talk to a parent who is just starting out on the journey with a child with a disability I always stress that they need to do everything they can to educate themselves and that there is no better place to start than STEP's Special Rights workshop. I make a point of telling them not to let anyone else write their child's story."



# Wayne Parker Advocate of the Year Recipients

## Christi Rice

2017



**Christi Rice and son Wesley Rice after accepting their awards.**

Christi Rice volunteers at Menchie's works a full-time job, is a wife to Jamie and a mom to four young people, two on the autism spectrum. Christi took a registered nurse position working on the weekends in order to dedicate her time and energy to starting up the Menchie's employment project. Everything she does at Menchie's is voluntary because, in her words, "I want to see every penny we earn go back to the store or to other ventures to promote employment of folks with disabilities in our community."

As you've already heard, advocating for a job for her son, Wesley, is how she began helping other young people with disabilities find employment opportunities through training at Menchie's. She said, "I saw what a difference a job made in my son's life and wanted that for all his friends. I love this community and have an overwhelming sense of urgency to make a way for folks like Wesley."

Christi honed her advocacy skills striving for educational success for her two sons with IEPs in the school system. Her efforts at Menchie's forced her to change her focus and direction. She said, "I began looking toward the future realizing there is so much more out there for our friends than high school. I realized that my focus needed to expand past today and work towards their future - towards a time when I am not here to advocate for them to have every opportunity anyone else may be given."

Christi believes the Menchie's initiative has given folks, and the community at large, hope. She said, "It shows us every day that we can never put limits on our friends with disabilities. We are proving every day that a business can thrive if only they give folks a chance."

For her advocacy efforts focused on promoting employment for young people with disabilities.

We applaud her for dedicating her time and energy the Menchie's employment project—for looking past today and working toward a future where all young people have an opportunity to become productive and contributing members of their community.

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# Wayne Parker Advocate of the Year Recipients

## Linda Burrows

2016



**Linda Burrows**  
**Nov. 10, 1940 –**  
**Mar. 16, 2016**

This year's award is being presented in the format of a lifetime achievement award for many years spent creating brighter futures for children and youth with disabilities and their families. The award is presented in honor and memory of Ms. Linda Burrows.

Linda was a long-time STEP staff member who left behind a legacy of serving others. She spent her life dedicated to raising awareness of the social and educational needs of children, in particular children and youth with disabilities and their families. Linda's style of empowering families was modeled after her personal advocacy efforts on behalf of her son Charles. She believed in establishing relationships, finding the positive energy and building programs and services around the shared goals of the parents, teachers, and others working to meet the needs of the individual. Linda drew people to her because she was always willing to listen and to help. Even in challenging situations she laughed often and was vivacious – living every minute with "spunk". She raised her son Charles to be a loving, caring man and to stand up for his beliefs. Through Linda's advocacy efforts, Charles, along with countless other individuals with special needs, are now contributing members of their communities. Accepting this award in memory of Linda Burrows is her son Charles Burrows.



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Charles Burrows, accompanied by his friend Sarah Harrison at the 2016 Tennessee Disability MegaConference Awards Banquet, prepares to receive the Wayne Parker Advocate of the Year Award in honor of his mother, Linda Burrows.

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# Wayne Parker Advocate of the Year Recipients

**Craig P. Barnes**

**2015**



**Craig P. Barnes  
accepts the 2015  
Wayne Parker  
Advocate of the  
Year from Karen  
Harrison, Executive  
Director**

Craig P. Barnes  
Staff Attorney- Consumer Unit  
Memphis Area Legal Services, Inc.

Mr. Barnes received his undergraduate degree from Duke University in 1996, and he received his J.D. from Saint Louis University School of Law in 2000. He began his career with a small firm in Seattle, WA representing indigent prisoners in cases involving prison conditions, sentencing structure and federal civil rights violations. In 2005, Mr. Barnes moved with his family to Memphis, where he joined Memphis Area Legal Services, Inc. (MALS) as the NCLC Brooks Consumer Law Fellow.

Mr. Barnes is currently a Staff Attorney with the Consumer Unit of MALS. He handles a wide variety of cases in state and federal court, and represents children with disabilities and their parents in matters in and related to Special Education. Mr. Barnes was the recipient of the Tennessee Bar Association's Access to Justice Awards "special recognition" for extraordinary pro bono service in the wake of Gulf Coast Hurricane, Katrina, and was given the TALS New Advocate of the Year Award in 2009. He recently won an unprecedented case in the US Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit. He currently serves on the board of Disability Rights Tennessee (DRT).

# Wayne Parker Advocate of the Year Recipients

**Belinda Martinez**

**2014**



**Belinda Martinez  
with STEP staff  
member  
Patricia Valladares**

Belinda is the mother of two children, a son who is 10 and a daughter who is 5 from Clarksville, TN. Her journey started when she received the diagnosis from Vanderbilt Children's Hospital of Autism for her son when he turned 3 years old. From that moment she began to look for information and resources. Belinda realized that, in the area she lived at that time in 2006, parents with children with special needs didn't have a contact person to ask for information about resources and other programs, especially for those who were new in the area.

Belinda began to look for information; this was made difficult, with no English and no knowledge about the area of Clarksville (Montgomery County). At the same time, she states: "I started building inside myself the gift to help others, and not allow new parents to be lost without information, resources, support, and training."

In 2009, Belinda began to contact different organizations, non-profits, and government agencies. Belinda shared, "All the organizations that contacted me are very important and special to me. STEP, Inc. was the first organization that I contacted for information and resources of how to manage an IEP. STEP helped me with the tools and education that I needed to help my son to succeed in the school system, as well others families that I support in this area."

Belinda is a volunteer "contact parent" for organizations like Vanderbilt Kennedy Center, Autism Middle TN, STEP, Inc. and other agencies in the Montgomery County area and nearby counties for families with children and youth with autism and other disabilities. She now has a website and Facebook page to provide information to families called Focus Autism Now TN.

Belinda has dedicated countless hours to provide families with information, resources, leadership, and advocacy services for IEP's or any other type of service for the benefit of the individual. In addition, Middle Tennessee organizations contact me to update parents and provide new services for them. All the work that she does is done because she is passionate about helping families; her service to her community is completely free and voluntary. She is an amazing example of using your gifts to "create a brighter future for children with disabilities."



# Wayne Parker Advocate of the Year Recipients

**Debbie Vitale**

**2013**



**Debbie Vitale with husband Carmin and STEP Staff members Martha Lopez and Patricia Valladares**

Debbie Vitale of Memphis at The ARC received the 2013 Advocate of the Year Award. Debbie is the founding and current President of the Shelby County Regional Special Education PTA (also known as SEPTA), the first special education PTA of its kind in Tennessee which chartered in April, 2012. Prior to the creation of SEPTA, Debbie served as a LEND trainee at the UT Boling Center for Neurodevelopment Disabilities a program which focuses on honing the skills of students/providers-to-be from various disciplines with respect to their advocacy work in the community serving children with different neurodevelopmental disabilities.

Before moving to Memphis, Debbie served as a Social Worker in Ohio. She worked for 15 years with children and families in different community-based programs including being the founding program director of an inner city counseling program and serving as the Director of a Runaway and Homeless youth shelter. She worked as an in-home family therapist assisting families with reunification as well as serving as the program manager for an Intensive Outpatient program with dually diagnosed adolescents. She has also taught at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio.

Debbie's drive for working with Special needs families come from both her social work background and the desire to make sure that everyone feels included and like a valued member of the community as well as her own experience as a parent of a child with special needs.

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# Wayne Parker Advocate of the Year Recipients

## Juan Cardona

2012



**Juan Cardona with his wife Anna, their daughter Jemima and STEP staff members Patricia Valladares and Joey Ellis**

Mr. Juan Cardona received the Wayne Parker 2012 Advocate of the Year Award at the annual Tennessee Disability Mega Conference in Nashville TN in May. Juan is the parent of Jemima, a spirited and loving daughter who has Autism. Juan attended at STEP workshop a couple of years ago and since that time has been not only used that information to help improve outcomes for Jemima, but has assisted many families on their journey to be effective advocates for their children with disabilities.

As a native Spanish speaker, his passion is to ensure that Hispanic families have information in their language. Mr. Cardona and his wife Anna have volunteered countless hours to translating materials to help families understand their rights under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. As the Wayne Parker recipients before him, Juan is devoted to efforts to ensure a brighter future for children with disabilities.

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## Jessica Jimmerson

2010



**Jessica Jimmerson (on right) accepts the award from Jacqueline Sakho, West TN Regional Coordinator**

Jessica Jimmerson, an early intervention specialist in Fayette County with the LeBonheur Early Intervention and Development Center received the 2010 Advocate of the Year Award. She has a degree in social work from the University of Tennessee and has been working for over nine years with children with disabilities.

Jessica was nominated for the award by several members of her community who have seen first hand her dedication to making sure families understand their rights and are given opportunities to speak up for their children. Ms. Jimmerson shared with us that her primary interest is advocating for children who have been referred to the mental health system by teachers and schools without having their educational needs evaluated and properly addressed. She currently hopes to improve the quality of special education services available to children in Fayette County by empowering parents with information and helping them become more involved in the team process by partnering with STEP to provide the needed training. Jessica's parents, Jerry and Diane Donahue and her husband Luke attended the awards banquet.

# Wayne Parker Advocate of the Year Recipients

## Trudy Sanders

2009



**Trudy and Adam**

Trudy Sanders, parent of a young son with a disability, received the Wayne Parker Advocate Award for 2009. Ms. Sanders worked on becoming an advocate since her son's first IEP meeting. Trudy continued to learn her rights, bring ideas to the IEP team to ensure her son was included with peers and doing grade level work. She worked with STEP staff to learn strategies to build relationships with school personnel and to be prepared for her son's IEP meetings. The process for Trudy involved keeping records, gathering data, and being confident and positive in the process. Adam now is on grade level in all subjects. He has been on field trips with supports provided to make that successful. Trudy shares information freely with others; always willing to help a family learn how to navigate the special education maze.

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## Heather King

2008



**Heather King  
with daughter,  
Brooklyn**

Heather King, a parent from Hardeman County Tennessee, was honored at the 2008 Disability Mega conference. Heather has two children; Brooklyn is 12 years old and experiences multiple disabilities. Heather has learned to navigate the complicated service delivery system for her daughter, who needs, among other things, nursing services in school. Over the years, she has become increasingly aware of Brooklyn's rights and her own strength as an advocate. Even though she lives in a rural part of West Tennessee, Heather has become a resource for other parents and frequently mentions the impact of her own advocacy upon other children in her area. She has been an inspiration to STEP staff as she has grown in knowledge and skills over the years.

# Wayne Parker Advocate of the Year Recipients

**Coral Getino**

**2003**



**Coral Getino**

STEP honored Coral Getino with the "Wayne Parker Advocate of the Year Award" at STEP's Annual Conference in 2003. Coral was recognized for the skillful, persistent, and collaborative advocacy for her young son with autism. She was selected from among a number of nominees, all of whom are parents who have turned to STEP for information and support in their efforts to improve the educational experience and outcomes for their children. Coral is a Knox County resident and we are delighted to recognize her for her amazing dedication and successful advocacy.

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**Phil & Maureen Deal**

**2001**

STEP honored Phil and Maureen Deal of Chattanooga with the first "Wayne Parker Memorial Parent Advocate of the Year Award" at the 2001 STEP and LRE for Life Conference in Knoxville.