

## From the Executive Director

Hello TNSTEP community:

Whew, it got hot fast, didn't it? Global warming or not, it's toasty out there! We hope you all are enjoying your summer and finding ways to be cool. Some of our staff have been taking much-deserved family vacations, while others are holding down the TNSTEP fort. We know that even though the school bus isn't coming to pick your kids up, or you're relishing a respite from sitting in the pick-up line, many of you are considering where things left off in May and trying to be prepared for the Fall 2023 semester. We are too, and, as always, we're here to support you.

Our TNSTEP Team has been very busy giving trainings. We've had the good fortune to collaborate with 600 School Resource Officers on making our schools safer and provided resources to over 260 school nurses on recognizing trauma and using trauma-informed practices. In addition, our Transition Team has delivered three workshops on "Turning 18: What Happens Next?" to families, professionals, and youth with disabilities who are learning how to "adult." We love this work, and if you haven't already, we hope you can take advantage of one of our training opportunities in the future.

In this edition of our Newsletter, we highlight the winners of our 2023 Advocate of the Year Awards and present the perspective from the mom of our youth award recipient on her family's advocacy efforts, challenges, and successes. There are also articles on the kickoff of our 2023 STEP Up to the Plate Youth Council, some essential tips from our "Turning 18" presentation, and information about our agency's Spanish resources.

As always, please feel free to reach out to our TNSTEP Team about any questions or concerns you might have about special education, or to let us know how we're doing in serving our community.

We love hearing from you and will respond as quickly as possible.

Please stay safe as you enjoy your summer activities!

Gratefully,

Karen Harrison

Executive Director, TNSTEP



## STEP Up to the Plate (SUTP) 2023

We're so excited to be in the second year of our STEP Up to the Plate Youth Council! Our young leaders have attended two meetings and are enjoying their participation stipends. Whenever we mention the payments to our Youth Council members, Alex Hancock, pictured below, exclaims, "time to go shopping!"

Thanks to Lily Bennett and Eric Massey, two of our returning SUTP Youth Council members, we learned a bit from our inaugural Council, and added some additional components. During the course of this year's sessions, the youth will participate in four "Group Growth Activities," designed to help them as they move into the opportunities and responsibilities that adulthood offers. The Group Growth topics are: Learning to Speak Up for Yourself; Adulting; Building Community and Staying Connected; and What's Out There to Help Me, a discussion of services and resources available to young people with disabilities. They are also invited to participate in one-on-one conversations on various professional development topics, such as navigating social media, creating effective resumes and cover letters, and understanding the importance of developing hard skills and soft skills. And then, a few of our meetings will just provide the opportunity for networking and social engagement.



We will be providing updates about our SUTP 2023 activities in future Newsletters.

*If you know of a young person with a disability who might benefit from being a part of SUTP, please reach out to Ned Andrew Solomon at [nedandrew.solomon@tnstep.org](mailto:nedandrew.solomon@tnstep.org), for an application and information about our SUTP 2024 Youth Council.*

## Presenting Our 2023 Advocate of the Year Award Winners

Photographs courtesy of Elizabeth Ratliff with Elle Jackson Photography and The Arc Tennessee

Each year, TNSTEP acknowledges people in Tennessee who have demonstrated a passion for improving the lives of individuals and families who experience disabilities. These three award recipients have left a positive and indelible mark on their communities through their advocacy and self-advocacy efforts. Please join us in congratulating Calyn Baldrige, Ericka Barrett, and Tabitha Lents.

### 2023 Wesley Rice Youth Advocate of the Year Award

*The Wesley Rice Youth Advocate of the Year Award is given to a youth with a disability between the ages of 6 and 26 who is a strong self-advocate at school, at home, or in the community.*

Calyn Baldrige was diagnosed with dyslexia in second grade and, more recently, Turner Syndrome. Calyn has never let these disabilities rule her life. She helps others at school and is always encouraging and sweet. She looks out for younger children who are experiencing their own challenges. Last year, she "taught" her class to raise awareness for Turner Syndrome, and is more than willing to tell anyone who asks about it.



It has bothered Calyn that the growth hormone injections she takes daily cost so much for some families. In response, she decided to start fundraising for the Turner Syndrome Foundation by spreading the word and having lemonade stands. She hopes these contributions will help with research to find a better way to do growth hormones. She raised over \$1,000 this past summer, and has been featured on the Turner Syndrome Foundation's website for her hard work. We at TNSTEP proudly name Calyn Baldrige the 2023 Wesley Rice Youth Advocate of the Year.

### 2023 Wayne Parker Advocate of the Year Award

*The Wayne Parker Advocate of the Year Award is given to someone who has exemplified using TNSTEP information to assist their child or someone else's child with receiving a free appropriate public education (FAPE).*



Ericka Barrett is a Metro Nashville Public Schools social worker. In her position, she has been working in underserved communities 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. Ericka has a son with Angelman Syndrome, which was the reason she chose social work in the first place. She has been able to advocate for school services for children with disabilities while supporting their families, working to bridge the gap

between education and home. Ericka is a product of her environment. She is a native of Nashville, an active member of several organizations, and a member of the leadership team of her department.

TNSTEP is delighted to present Ericka Barrett with the 2023 Wayne Parker Advocate of the Year Award.

### 2023 Scott Finney Self-Advocate of the Year Award

*The Scott Finney Self-Advocate of the Year Award honors a person who has embodied the positive character traits of being a strong self-advocate by accepting responsibility, speaking up for themselves and others, and leading by example.*

Tabitha Lents has worked hard to bring awareness to bullying and other rights for students with disabilities. She has developed social media pages and moderates online support groups for victims of bullying, with a special interest in supporting parents of children with disabilities, who are often victims of bullying and can't always speak up for themselves.

TNSTEP is pleased to honor Tabitha Lents with the 2023 Scott Finney Self-Advocacy of the Year Award.

*Please consider nominating an outstanding individual for the TNSTEP 2024 Advocate of the Year Awards.*



## **Leaning on a Life Motto**

**by Chrissi Baldrige, Calyn, Isla, and Cage's Mom**

We were never promised this life would be easy, and man if it doesn't seem like some of us get an extra helping of hard. I've sure felt overwhelmed with it all at times. One thing I've always firmly believed though is that for anything we go through God has a plan, and our true character is revealed by how we handle the hardships.

Because dyslexia is prevalent in mine and my husband's families, I knew we would have to pay special attention to our kids throughout their schooling to watch for any issues. With my oldest daughter, Calyn, we discovered it halfway through kindergarten. I was so shaken and had no idea how to fight this. No clue where to start.

Calyn transferred schools and repeated kindergarten. When I brought up all her challenges to the administration at the new school they ignored me, for two years. In desperation, I broke out the laptop, printer, and a highlighter and began the process of teaching myself the rules for special education in Tennessee. Finally, after getting special education district staff and school board members involved (they sent an email to the superintendent) we were able to get the ball rolling. After a long, six months we got an IEP, or Individualized Education Program. I couldn't fathom why this process was so difficult! It really felt like the school didn't want to help my child.

Then, in second grade, my son, Cage, received an IEP for specified learning disabilities. Thankfully, due to all the research and relationship building I had done, the second time around was a lot easier. Shortly thereafter, my preschooler, Isla, got an IEP for speech delay. So, if you're keeping track, that's three for three children who qualified for special education services!

Two years ago, our world was rocked again when Calyn was diagnosed with Turner Syndrome (TS). It's an extremely rare genetic disorder caused by a missing second X chromosome which affects every part of her body. Initially, we were terrified. There were many doctor appointments and tests, and a lot more research and information gathering. I broke out the trusty laptop, printer, and highlighter again and this accountant learned all about genetics.

Those first few months involved a lot of tears, fears, and hard conversations. So many times we felt completely alone. The problem is, when your child has a rare disorder there aren't many people you can relate to who are in the same boat. We were positively overwhelmed. My husband, David, and I sat our daughter down and explained what was going on. I was still sticking by my life motto - *God has a plan, and our true character is revealed by how we handle the hardships* - and during one of these tough conversations I said it, off-handedly.

That girl took that idea and ran full steam ahead with it. God is using this little girl in such amazing ways to help other girls know they're not alone. No one at her school knew about Turner Syndrome, so Calyn taught a class on it. She was saddened that the cost of her daily growth hormone injection was \$5,000 a month, creating an additional hardship for many families, so she started doing lemonade stands and sewing potholders to raise money. To date she has raised almost \$1,500 and is still going strong.

I think life mottos are something we often take for granted. We fully believe in them. And, if you ask for help, we help. If you ask me how to get an IEP, I'll give you enough information to fill a book. God used a pint-sized redhead with a highly complex genetic disorder to teach me, and others, that lesson. She taught me to reach out to another mom struggling with a new diagnosis, to show kindness and help her help her kids that have their own obstacles.

Maybe in the grand scheme of things it's not much, but I can guarantee that, for that mom, it meant the world. To have someone who understands. To understand how our lives don't always revolve around our kids' ballgames and plays, but doctor appointments, tests, hours of homework, and stress.

No, life isn't always easy, but just taking a look into that loved one's eyes and you realize again and again that it's all totally worth it. And that God does have a plan.

*The Baldrige family Triple Threat, L to R: Calyn, Isla, and Cage*



## Turning 18 - What Happens Next?

by Ned Andrew Solomon, Communications Support and Transition Specialist, TNSTEP

When youth turn 18 years old, they have reached the “age of majority,” and, unless a court of law has deemed otherwise, the child is considered to be a competent adult. Yes, they may need support in making important life decisions - just like everyone else! - but they really are in the driver’s seat now. They have now entered the world of adult services, and that means an important change has occurred in systems, like education and healthcare. Instead of parents or other family members driving activities like IEP meetings and doctor appointments, the educators and physicians will be talking to the young adult, directly. These are some of the things that should be kept in mind after a young person turns 18:



- **Consider moving to an adult healthcare provider.** Some pediatric providers will no longer see a client after they turn 18.
- **Understand the transfer of rights.** Forms may need to be signed if a parent wants to keep communicating with a doctor or the school team after the youth becomes an adult.
- **Get a photo ID.** A picture ID will be essential for doctors, hospital admissions, and travel. A young person doesn’t need to be a driver to get a photo ID.
- **Apply for SSI.** Some youth with disabilities may be eligible to receive Supplemental Security Income, especially if they are unable to work.
- **Apply for a Medicaid waiver.** Our state has three Medicaid waivers that can provide supports in the home or in a community setting. There are eligibility requirements to access these services.
- **Open an ABLE account.** ABLE (Achieving a Better Life Experience) accounts allow an individual with a disability to save money without interfering with their benefits. Other people can contribute to these accounts.
- **Consider independent housing.** Becoming an adult may mean that the young person will need to make some choices about where and with whom they live.
- **Apply to Vocational Rehabilitation (VR).** For youth seeking employment, VR can be a great resource for supports, training, and, in some cases, paid tuition.
- **Consider further education and/or training.** Tennessee has private colleges, community colleges, post-secondary programs for students with intellectual disabilities, and trade schools, known as the Colleges of Applied Technology.
- **Register to vote.** Those youth who want to participate in our state and country’s political process should make sure they are registered to vote in time for the next election.

*Please reach out to us if you need more information or help accessing any of these resources.*

## TNSTEP Spanish Resources

Did you know that TNSTEP provides support, training, and services to multicultural families of children and youth with special needs from birth to age 26? Our Spanish-speaking families have direct access to resources and information through the Spanish section of our website, located here: [tnstep.org/Espanol](https://tnstep.org/Espanol). This section of the TNSTEP website contains three major areas:

### Know your Basic Rights

- On-demand videos
- Online webinars
- Upcoming Workshops and Events Calendar

### More information

- Spanish Resources
- Spanish Support Groups
- Information Library with downloadable information

### Communicate

- Bi-lingual contact information
- Spanish Newsletter sign-up
- News articles

This section also showcases one of our Spanish Online Basic Rights Workshops.



*Our bi-lingual TNSTEP team is here for you. Please get in touch with us if you have questions about special education, have a problem at school, need our support, or beneficial resources to help you along your journey.*

## JOB OPENINGS AT TNSTEP

There are currently two job openings at TNSTEP:

West TN Family and Youth Education Specialist and East TN Director of Regional Services

For details about these opportunities and how to apply, please visit <https://tnstep.org/careers> and go to the Careers link at the bottom of the home page.

## CONNECT WITH TNSTEP!

ESPAÑOL: (800) 975-2919

BUSINESS OFFICE: (423) 639-0125 (phone)

TOLL-FREE: (800) 280-7837

[information@tnstep.org](mailto:information@tnstep.org)

Follow us online at [tnstep.org](https://tnstep.org)

and on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, and LinkedIn at @tnstep

## CONTACT YOUR TNSTEP REGIONAL DIRECTORS:

WEST: | [information@tnstep.org](mailto:information@tnstep.org)

EAST: | [information@tnstep.org](mailto:information@tnstep.org)

MIDDLE: PATRICIA VALLADARES | (615) 463-2310 | [patricia.valladares@tnstep.org](mailto:patricia.valladares@tnstep.org)

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KAREN HARRISON | EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

JOEY ELLIS | DIRECTOR OF YOUTH SERVICES

DORCA ROSE GUAYURPA | BILINGUAL COMMUNITY OUTREACH AND EDUCATION SPECIALIST

LISA GOSNELL | RESEARCH, DATA & INFORMATION COORDINATOR

DONNA JENNINGS | BUSINESS/PERSONNEL MANAGER

STEPHANIE WILLIS | DIRECTOR OF COMMUNICATIONS

DEREK FLAKE | JUVENILE JUSTICE AND CIVIL RIGHTS LIAISON

NED ANDREW SOLOMON | COMMUNICATIONS SUPPORT

SHERIDAN SMITH | STRATEGIC GROWTH MANAGER

KARIS RESTINA | DEVELOPMENT MANAGER

If mailing an item to our business office, please send to TNSTEP, 1113 Tusculum Blvd. #393, Greeneville, TN 37745. If coming by for an appointment, the physical address is 113 Austin Street, Greeneville, TN 37745.



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