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.”
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.”
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.”
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.
Linda Burrows 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.

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.
Craig P. Barnes
2015

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).
Belinda Martinez

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.”
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.
Juan Cardona 2012

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.

Jessica Jimmerson 2010

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.
Trudy Sanders 2009

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.

Heather King 2008

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.
Coral Getino 2003

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 Count reside and we are delighted to recognize her for her amazing dedication and successful advocacy.

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.