

PACER mourns Paula Goldberg

It is with tremendous sadness that PACER Center announces the death of its co-founder and longtime executive director, Paula F. Goldberg, who died peacefully of natural causes on May 15 at her home in California. She was 79.

“Paula was an extraordinary individual with tremendous vision whose leadership, advocacy, and passion has made the world a better place for countless numbers of children with disabilities and their families,” said Mark O’Leary, President of PACER’s board of directors. “After co-founding PACER in 1977, she led the organization’s growth from one project to more than 30 programs supporting children with all disabilities and their families. Paula was a nationally recognized leader on disability issues who was instrumental in the creation of parent information centers throughout the country that support families of children with disabilities.”

PACER’s associate director, Gretchen Godfrey, who has been with PACER since 2004 and worked closely with Paula, has been named interim executive director. The PACER board of directors will conduct a search for a new executive director.



Paula at PACER’s 2019 Annual Benefit in Minneapolis

EARLY YEARS

Paula was a lifelong activist and community leader, dedicated to the needs of children with disabilities and their families. She earned her B.S. in Education with honors from the University of Minnesota and did graduate work at both the University of Minnesota and the University of Chicago. Prior to co-founding PACER Center, Paula was an elementary school teacher in Chicago and Minneapolis, and, as president of the Minnesota League of Women Voters, authored two studies on special education in the Minneapolis Public Schools.

During her early years in Rochester, Minnesota, Paula learned from her parents the importance of helping others. Her mother, Helen Friedman, a Yiddish interpreter at the Mayo Clinic, often took young Paula along when she volunteered at the Rochester State Hospital.

Paula cherished her strong partnership with her husband, Mel, a law school professor and dean who also founded Legal Aid programs in Minnesota and Illinois. They were married for 32 years, until his death in 1998. “I had a husband who was very supportive of me,” Paula once said. “My husband read ‘The Feminine Mystique’ by Betty Friedan before we got married. I’d never read it! He was very supportive of what I did.” Mel provided PACER and some of the families it served with pro bono legal services.

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PACER BEGINNINGS

Paula and Marge Goldberg (no relation) met at a meeting of disability rights advocates and founded the Parent Advocacy Coalition for Educational Rights, aka PACER Center, in 1977. Paula's background in education and Marge's experience as a lobbyist for special education, and her lived experience as the parent of a child with a disability, made them an unbeatable team. "We wanted to improve educational opportunities for children with disabilities and educate parents about the few special education laws," Paula said. When PACER received its first federal grant, Paula and Marge became co-executive directors and hired several part-time staff.

Paul Ackerman, who was with the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), in the U.S. Department of Education, was the program officer for that first federal grant. Paul recalled, "We funded projects for special educators; this one from PACER Center did not exactly fit that category, but was very innovative. It was a really new idea, parents helping parents. At the time, all the funding was focused on professionals, like teachers." That grant was the beginning of his relationship with PACER that has spanned more than 40 years and two continents, and continues today.



Original five employees: Paula Goldberg, Marci Bergdahl, Joan Schoepke, Evy Anderson, and Marge Goldberg



Paula Goldberg, Paul Ackerman, and Marge Goldberg

During multiple visits, Paul developed strong relationships with Paula and Marge. "We thought PACER would be special. We started hearing about them everywhere we went. PACER was becoming a household word in parent and education circles. The natural leadership of Paula and Marge was quite evident. People began to look up to them," Paul said. "It was not hard to love PACER."

Early on in the founding of PACER, Paula applied and was accepted to law school. She knew that her decision about whether to attend would impact her family's future and decided instead to stay with PACER. "I wasn't sure of the new organization's future, but I knew that attending law school would limit my flexibility to attend my young sons' activities," Paula said later.

Advocacy and supporting the community was a family value: Paula's mother, Helen, became a dedicated PACER volunteer and employee, and from a young age, Paula's sons David and Robert frequently volunteered with PACER, doing everything from collating papers to performing puppet shows that modeled inclusion of young children with disabilities.

"The lessons taught in our household were from actions, not words," Robert said. "We were shown by our parents that it was important to help people, especially people who could not help themselves. Whether it was a neighbor with a problem or a national issue like the rights of children, we were shown how to take on a problem big or small and apply everything we knew and, especially with my mom, everyONE we knew to try to solve the issue or at least help in some way. Growing up, we were told we needed to be 'good people' and then were shown over and over again how to go about that in a practical way. Solving problems and helping people was the focus in our home and my mother set out to build PACER to do just that."

Robert added that Paula's goal wasn't personal recognition, but rather to build an organization with all of the resources necessary to provide families with the support needed to ensure their children with disabilities received the appropriate education and necessary services. Robert went on to say, "Our mother really showed us how to be entrepreneurs. She saw a need and set out to find a solution, through her own efforts as well as convincing others to join in the fight."

In addition to PACER serving tens of thousands of Minnesotans each year, Paula was a national leader in the parent center movement, helping create parent centers throughout the country, mentoring other leaders, and helping write the legislation that funded parent centers. "Paula was in a leadership position of a parents' advisory group," Paul Ackerman said. "She played a quiet role, focusing on the quality of PACER's work and helping



Paula with sons Robert and David Goldberg

"Solving problems and helping people was the focus in our home and my mother set out to build PACER to do just that."

-Robert Goldberg

the Parent Training and Information Centers. More and more people learned that they had a resource in Paula."

Paula was also the recipient of numerous awards and honors, including the FBI Director's Community Leadership Award and the University of Minnesota's Alumni of the Year Award.

IT'S ALL ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS

One of Paula's enduring beliefs was that success is all about relationships, and that has been a thread woven through her work at PACER. Her relationships with funders, donors, and volunteers are legendary. Entrepreneur Steve Simon recalled that he became involved with PACER after a phone call from Paula's mother, who wanted to sell him tickets to PACER's Benefit. PACER was a client of his then-company, American Sharecom. Steve bought the tickets, and subsequently became a Benefit sponsor.

His relationship with Paula and PACER deepened, especially after a call Steve made to Paula during PACER's capital campaign for the building at 8161 Normandale. He recalled, "I asked Paula how the funding was [progressing]. She told me it had been going pretty well but had stalled. I asked her how much still needed to be raised, and she said, '\$800,000.' I told her that I'd like to help. Paula asked how I wanted to help." Steve said, with a smile in his voice, "I told her, 'the very best way. I will give you the \$800,000 you need.'" Paula was, he said, "speechless."

Sheryl Sandberg, Paula's daughter-in-law, said, "From the moment we met, I was in awe of Paula's commitment to helping others. She co-founded the PACER Center because she deeply believed that every child deserves every opportunity. And,



Muffy and Mara MacMillan with Paula

for decades, she gave PACER her all, leading with a deep dedication to her team, the organization, and the families she served. Paula never missed an opportunity to lobby in DC for better legislation, to raise money to provide more services, or to rally anyone she met to support families in need.

"Paula was both an extraordinary leader, and an incredible mother, grandmother, wife, sister, and friend. The example she set – and the unconditional love and support she gave – will continue to guide us all."

Philanthropist Muffy MacMillan, a longtime supporter of PACER and chair of PACER's endowment campaign, remembered her first connection to Paula and PACER. More than 30 years ago, her daughter, Mara, who has Williams syndrome, was about to enter school, and the district did not have a special education program in place. "I worked with Karen Orcutt [Orono's longtime superintendent] and Paula to set up special education in Orono, and that's how I got connected to PACER. We set up classrooms and curriculums and hired staff. No one knew how to do this but PACER. I am very grateful to Paula."

PACER'S ONGOING INNOVATION

Under Paula's leadership, PACER has had a national and even international impact. She was instrumental in founding PACER's National Bullying Prevention Center, which creates and shares resources that support communities and schools in promoting kindness, acceptance, and inclusion. She helped develop the first assistive technology center for children with disabilities in India, utilizing professional and business relationships to help others. Paula guided PACER as it continued to evolve in new ways to meet the changing needs of families and help children and youth with disabilities have successful futures.

Paula cherished the closeness of her family. She was especially proud of her five grandchildren and loved to talk about them and their accomplishments. She is preceded in death by her beloved husband, Mel; her son, David; parents, Bob and Helen Friedman; and in-laws, Harry and Ruth Goldberg. Survived by her son, Robert Goldberg; daughter-in-law, Sheryl Sandberg; sister Sandra F. Greenberg (Mort); nephews, Craig Greenberg (Cindy) and Mark Greenberg (Pamela); and five grandchildren. ■



Paula with FBI Director Robert Mueller

Remembering Paula



Gretchen Godfrey, PACER's Interim Executive Director

Staff profile: interim executive director

Gretchen Godfrey

Gretchen Godfrey joined PACER Center's staff nearly 18 years ago. A year-long volunteer position after college indirectly led her to PACER. After earning her Bachelor's degree from the St. Olaf College, Gretchen was placed at the Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund (DREDF) in Berkeley, California through the Lutheran Volunteer Corps. At DREDF, she took parent intake calls, learned about California's special education laws, and worked on voting and transportation policy issues.

It was a great fit for Gretchen, who is passionate about educational access and loves children, but didn't see herself working in a classroom. She explained, "There were a lot of teachers in my family, and education was definitely a priority. I loved working with kids – I did a fair amount of babysitting growing up – but I decided I wanted that to be a 'fun thing,' not my job. The education policy side seemed like a good way to connect my interests."

When her year in Berkeley was done, Gretchen's supervisor suggested that she contact PACER Center to see if they had any openings. She began with PACER in September 2004 as a project associate with the National Technical Assistance Alliance for Parent Centers project. "I handled basic communications with parent centers, managed data collection, and produced a monthly newsletter. After a while, [PACER's executive director] Paula [Goldberg] noticed my interest and skill in writing, and asked me to help write project reports, grants and other publications," Gretchen said.

Growing into leadership

When the Alliance project ended in 2013, Paula asked Gretchen to take on more responsibility, and promoted her to the position of Assistant Director (later, Associate Director). "I do think that Paula saw leadership potential in me before I saw it in myself," Gretchen said. In her new role, Gretchen assumed more grant writing and project management responsibility, took on some staff supervision, and helped with logistics for PACER's Annual Benefit.

"Although I feel I somewhat stumbled into PACER, it turned out to be a really good match for my skills and interests," Gretchen said. "Because children's issues are so important to me, it's been wonderful to work someplace that is dedicated to everyone having equal access to education, and I enjoy being able to support PACER's mission through grant writing and program administration.

"It's rewarding to collaborate with co-workers on big projects like the Benefit. As my position has grown, I've also found it fun to work with so many different PACER staff and to see how their work supports PACER," Gretchen said. "I always enjoy hearing the success stories of the families PACER helps."

Don McNeil, the vice president of PACER's board of directors, said, "Gretchen works behind the scenes. She is modest and doesn't give herself credit for the impact her work has. I've seen her grow in her position." Don, who has been one of PACER's most active volunteers at the state capitol, frequently testifying on behalf of PACER families, added, "Gretchen is

a 'quiet leader' in the community on legislative and advocacy issues. I have relied on her to help understand the nuances of policy issues."

PACER's transition

With the death of Paula Goldberg and the ensuing search for a new executive director, PACER's board named Gretchen the interim executive director. "When PACER's board created a crisis and succession plan, Paula had always envisioned that Gretchen could step up and handle PACER's operations during the transition," Don said. "Gretchen has always been the person for grant writing and understanding the nuts and bolts of how to run PACER."

"In addition, she is a consummate professional. PACER's board has a great deal of confidence in her."

Gretchen said that she feels honored to be named interim executive director. "There are big shoes to fill, continuing the legacy of what Paula and others have created. My role is helping staff through the initial leadership change; making sure we're keeping up on grant requirements and operational pieces; and helping with plans to resume some in-person work in a hybrid model. I'll also be working with staff and board to consider our programming priorities moving forward."

Discussing her longevity at PACER, Gretchen commented, "One thing that keeps me here is knowing that everyone, regardless of disability, deserves the best education possible to help them reach their potential. Working together with staff who share that goal and commitment is incredibly meaningful." ■

PACER launches executive director search

PACER Center's board of directors has begun the search process for the next executive director. The board will leverage an executive search firm to conduct a national search, and will appoint a committee to oversee the process.

"Of course no one can ever fill Paula's shoes, thankfully her compassion and strength will always be a part of PACER," said Mark O'Leary, president of PACER's board. "We are confident, though, that we will find a mission-driven, visionary leader with a deep understanding of the nonprofit sector. PACER is an amazing organization with a great team and exceptional community support. Our next executive director will have the exciting opportunity to build on Paula's legacy and help shape the next phase of this vital organization."

PACER welcomes applicants to this search. Information about how to apply for the position will be posted on PACER's website and in PACER publications as it becomes available.

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PACER Center enhances the quality of life and expands opportunities for children, youth, and young adults with all disabilities and their families so each person can reach his or her highest potential. PACER operates on the principles of parents helping parents, supporting families, promoting a safe environment for all children, and working in collaboration with others. PACER is also the National Bullying Prevention Center, offering innovative resources for students, parents, educators, and others.

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SAVE THE DATE!
PACER's Annual Benefit!
Saturday, November 5, 2022

INFO: PACER.org/Benefit

From IFSP to IEP

When a child moves from early intervention to preschool

When a child younger than age three qualifies for early intervention services, an **Individual Family Service Plan (IFSP)** is developed with the family's involvement and participation. The IFSP is a written document that spells out the supports and services that will be provided to the family of an eligible infant or toddler. One of the most important facets of the IFSP is family involvement. Special education laws recognize the importance of parents as their child's earliest teachers, and with the IFSP, families work with providers to develop the strategies that work best to help children learn new skills through daily routines and activities. The IFSP ends on the child's third birthday.

When the child turns three

Before a child turns three, the family's IFSP service provider works with the family to plan the transition from early intervention services. "If the child is likely to qualify for preschool special education, the provider, with parental input, will develop an evaluation plan to determine the child's eligibility for preschool special education services," said Judy Swett, PACER parent advocate and early childhood project coordinator.

Everything changes when the child turns three and is off to preschool. If the child continues to need and qualify for special education services, a new educational plan, called an **Individualized Education Program (IEP)**, is developed – and parents are a crucial part of the team that develops this plan. IEPs are updated yearly and can follow a child all the way from preschool through 12th grade. The preschool teachers will use strategies during the classroom routines and activities to teach the child new skills.

Parental involvement is just as important after a child "graduates" from the IFSP to the IEP. A new team to help the child is put into place. Parents and the child's teacher are always part of the IEP team. "Parents are the experts on their child: they know what does and doesn't work for the child, along with their strengths and challenges, and potentially have important information about the child's disability," Judy said, adding, "Depending on the child's needs, the team may also

include occupational, physical, and/or speech language therapists. The team works together to develop an IEP that will help the child succeed in the preschool classroom."



"Studies have proven that family involvement is key to a child's success."

- Judy Swett, PACER Early Childhood Project Coordinator

Preschool success

The preschool teacher can use their knowledge of typical child development to provide parents with ideas about how the family can help the child learn important preschool skills. "Studies have proven that family involvement is key to a child's success," Judy said.

Opportunities for involvement include:

Parent/teacher conferences

It's important that parents attend parent/teacher conferences to learn how the child is progressing in the typical preschool curriculum.

Preschool family activities

Participating in these activities allows the parent to meet other families and help their child develop friendships with peers.

Volunteering at the child's school

One way to be involved is to serve on the preschool's parent committee or advisory board. "If a parent is unable to commit to an ongoing time commitment, they might consider instead helping out with a fundraising event or field trip. These are good opportunities to meet other parents and see their child interact with friends," Judy said.

Beyond preschool

Because early intervention services are focused on family involvement, parents sometimes worry that the end of these home-based services will also end their involvement in their child's special education services – but that isn't so. As the child grows, IEP team members will come and go, but the involvement of parents remains constant. Parental involvement in planning their child's special education services and supporting their progress in the general education curriculum is key in helping the child succeed in preschool – and in all the school years that follow. ■

When parents and schools disagree: Options for resolving disputes

PACER Center is excited to announce the publication of **two new brochures** that explain how parents of children with disabilities can resolve disputes with their child's school. "At PACER Center, we help parents recognize that exercising their right to disagree with the school district is an important and productive way to advocate for their child," said PACER Senior Parent Advocate Rachel Pearson, who coordinates PACER's Dispute Resolution project with Senior Parent Advocate Jesús Villaseñor.

PACER Center encourages parents to work with their child's Individualized Education Program (IEP) case manager or the school district's special education director to resolve disagreements about their child's education, but realizes there are times when parents and schools need assistance in coming to an agreement. That's where dispute resolution options come into play. "Minnesota's dispute resolution options are designed to move parents and school districts forward in the special education process to meet the needs of every child with a disability," Rachel said. "We created these brochures to support a clearer understanding of the range of dispute resolution options in Minnesota, so parents can use them confidently and effectively."

The brochures feature easy-to-understand charts that explain each option. **The first brochure, which centers on special education meetings where parents and school districts work together to resolve disagreements**, includes information about conciliation conferences, facilitated team meetings, and mediation, along with explanations about why parents request each type of meeting; how to request the meeting; who participates in the meeting; a timeline for when the meeting is held; and what outcomes are expected from each meeting.



Jesús Villaseñor and Rachel Pearson

The second brochure, which features the complaint processes available to parents of students with disabilities, includes special education complaints, due process complaints/hearings, and discrimination complaints, along with explanations about why parents file each type of complaint; how to file the complaint; the timeline for when the complaint must be filed; the decision maker for each complaint; and what outcomes are expected from each complaint.

PACER parent advocates are available to help parents navigate dispute resolution options and discuss how to communicate effectively with their child's school district. Parents can call PACER at (952) 838-9000 or email PACER@PACER.org. The Minnesota Department of Education also offers online resources at education.mn.gov/MDE/dse/sped/conf. ■



To view the online version of the dispute resolution brochure charts and for more information about dispute resolution options, visit:

PACER.org/learning-center/dispute-resolution

Arabella Velleux:

“Sometimes people underestimate me”

Arabella Velleux knew from the age of five that she was not a typical child. Despite Arabella's and her mom Kelley's best efforts, it took until she was 13 to receive a mental health diagnosis. “I had an eight-hour neuropsychological evaluation, and I was diagnosed with generalized anxiety disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) and autism,” said the 16-year-old, who graduated from high school in May and will attend Augsburg University in the fall.

When Arabella spoke up about her mental health needs prior to her diagnoses, people often dismissed her concerns, she said. “Academics is one of my ‘sweet spots.’ I've always done well in school. I study for fun! And I heard over and over again, ‘you're so smart, your grades are good, how can you be mentally ill?’” The diagnoses, she said, helped with those questions. “It helped people understand me better,” Arabella said. Another benefit has been receiving a 504 Plan. The law requires that schools eliminate barriers which prevent a student receiving a 504 Plan from fully participating in school activities. This often means providing accommodations to the student.



Arabella Velleux, ready for prom

On the flip side, when people who don't know Arabella well hear about her diagnoses, “They tend to underestimate me,” she said.

Arabella has found a community in PACER's Mental Health Youth Advisory Board. She enjoys talking to legislators at PACER's Day at the Capitol. “It's important for me to discuss mental health and tell my story to legislators because not everyone with mental health issues can talk about it,” Arabella explained. “Change happens at high levels, and it has more impact when kids tell their stories rather than adults talking about them.”

Arabella isn't the only member of the Velleux family to benefit from PACER. Kelley was inspired to make a major change in her life. “I'm finishing up my licensure as a special education teacher,” Kelley said.

Planning for the future

Arabella is keenly interested in public policy. “I'm planning to get my Bachelor's degree in social work and political science/public policy,” Arabella said. Though she just graduated from high school, she is nearly halfway to her degree; through Minnesota's PSEO (Post-secondary Educational Options) program, Arabella spent most of her last two years of high school taking classes at the University of Minnesota. “I went through almost a dozen ideas for majors,” she said with a smile. “I changed my mind every semester.” Among the contenders were nursing, marine science, aerospace engineering, and global studies. One thing she didn't change her mind about was where she would attend college after graduation. “Augsburg is hugely supportive of mental health issues,” she said. She is already thinking about what happens after college: “I'm planning to get my master's in social work and public policy. I'm interested in focusing on human rights and the rights of immigrants,” she said. “I did an internship at The Advocates for Human Rights.”

As she navigates school and her other interests, Arabella says that having balance in her life and seeking support when she needs it are key for her in managing her mental health. She can feel overwhelmed when she tries to do too much. “Balance is the biggest thing I've struggled with,” she said. “My mom has

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“It's important for me to discuss mental health and tell my story to legislators because not everyone with mental health issues can talk about it.”

– Arabella Velleux

Friends of PACER's (VIRTUAL) *Run Walk Roll* Moving toward a world without bullying

The 2022 virtual Run Walk Roll, which was held during the entire month of April, "was a great success," said Julie Hertzog, director of PACER's National Bullying Prevention Center. "Our goal was to 'circle the globe with kindness, acceptance, and inclusion,' as we move toward a world without bullying," Julie said. "It is 24,901 miles around the earth, and our participants logged an amazing 32,293 miles of running, walking, and rolling!"

More than 50 teams participated, and 600 people registered. "It was a free event, and we received many generous donations," Julie said. Top mileage winners and those who reached personal goals received prizes – but this was not a competition; every mile counted in this collective effort. "We also held random prize drawings," Julie noted.

The top teams were Team David, of Minneapolis, MN, who recorded an amazing 3,931 miles; RamFam of Edgewater Park, NJ, who logged 2,519 miles; and We Achieve of Lehigh, PA, who added 2,009 miles to the total.

The top individual participants were Blaise Schaeffer of Durham, NC, with 924 miles; Rosie Saenz of Corpus Christi, TX, with 860 miles; and Donnamarie Eckhardt of Riverside, NJ, with 819 miles. Blaise said, "I'm happy to have helped reach the goal of circling the world! Knowing the mileage over the month was supporting the mission of creating a more inclusive world kept me pedaling."

Participants were enthusiastic about the event. 96% of those who responded to a survey rated the Run Walk Roll as "excellent."

A participant summed it up best: "I feel like I am making a difference, and am part of a larger community committed to bullying prevention."

Friends of PACER's next Run Walk Roll will be held in April of 2023. ■



"I'm happy to have helped reach the goal of circling the world! Knowing the mileage over the month was supporting the mission of creating a more inclusive world kept me pedaling."

-Blaise Schaeffer



Arabella Velleux refereeing a soccer match

Arabella continued from previous page

been preaching balance for as long as I can remember. I've realized that I need to prioritize what makes me happy and what I need to get done."

"Arabella has learned to reach out for support when necessary," her mom, Kelley, said. "We've been blessed with support in her school community and through PACER. She's also learned to drop things that don't support her or don't fit into her priorities."

In addition to school, Arabella works as a barista at a local coffee shop and is a soccer referee. "Some people feel the need to have a group of friends and go out all the time. That may be a 'normal' social life, but it's not what fits me. I have one or two close friends, I'm very content with that. Besides academics, I'd like to become more involved in the community," she said.

"My biggest thing, though, is putting myself and my mental health first." Music and physical activity are part of her self-care, Arabella said.

"The more I prioritize my mental health, the easier it is." ■

VIRGINIA RICHARDSON

retires after 42 years

Virginia Richardson, PACER Center's longest serving employee after Paula Goldberg, retired this past winter as manager of parent training.

"I loved what I was doing," Virginia said. "I feel really good, and I could still do my job. I was delighted that I had work during the pandemic, helping families that needed help. I decided, though, that I should move out and let younger people take over. At 91, I shouldn't be taking up that space."

Getting started

In the late 1970's, Virginia chaired the Accountability Committee of the Minneapolis Public Schools. Back then, she didn't drive, and a committee member named Paula Goldberg offered her a ride to and from the meetings. Paula was co-executive director of a new organization, PACER Center, and Virginia became one of PACER's first volunteers. She traveled throughout Minnesota, teaching parents about the new special education laws. Virginia joined PACER's board of directors, and during her first term as president of the board, Paula and PACER co-founder, Marge Goldberg, asked her to join the staff as a parent advocate. "I was the eighth employee," Virginia recalled.

Virginia was a natural advocate. Prior to working at PACER, her oldest child Debbie was diagnosed with epilepsy and cognitive disabilities as a kindergartner. When professionals advised Virginia and her husband Sam to place her in a home for children who are not able to learn, "I knew then that I would have to be my daughter's first and best advocate," Virginia said. Debbie learned to read and graduated from high school. "She takes the newspaper and reads it every day and understands most of it," Virginia said proudly.

Looking back

In an interview several years ago, Paula Goldberg said, "Virginia has removed barriers for children with disabilities, and has had a life-changing, positive effect on many thousands of families." Paula said that Virginia played a major role in helping shape PACER Center into the organization it is today. "Virginia helped PACER grow into a national model of parent advocacy. She also helped instill in PACER a priority of supporting diverse families in all of the programs and services we provide."

When Virginia looks back at her time at PACER, it's the people she focuses on: the families she helped, and the co-workers who stood by her side. "My reward is in seeing the growth in families," she said. "We see hope in every child, and we have



Virginia
Richardson

"Virginia helped PACER grow into a national model of parent advocacy. She also helped instill in PACER a priority of supporting diverse families in all of the programs and services we provide."

- Paula Goldberg

seen hope make a difference. Schools and doctors deal in what they see as realities, but we know all families and children are unique. In special education, the testing is very important, but how you view yourself is important too." Time and again, she has seen children exceed the expectations others have set for them. "The possibilities of a human person are fascinating. When we look at things that define who you are, what's inside impacts all of that too."

She believes PACER's work environment is unique. "There was never any competition between the advocates at PACER," she said. "Everyone shared their knowledge. I learned so much from others at PACER. I thought knowledge just freely flowed. Not all workplaces are like that. As we worked together, we really helped each other. We were concerned about each other, we knew about our co-workers' children and cared about them. We were like a family."

Moving ahead

Virginia is blessed with good health and lives an active life. "I'm a person with many interests," Virginia said. "I am never bored, and if I am, it's my own choosing, because I always have

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Announcing the **PAULA F. GOLDBERG CHAMPION FOR CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES AWARD**

The late Paula Goldberg, PACER's co-founder and long-time executive director, was an extraordinary leader who made the world a better place for countless numbers of children with disabilities through her work at PACER Center. This award, given in her honor, was created to recognize an individual or group who has demonstrated exceptional advocacy and leadership in support of the rights of children with disabilities. This award will be given annually, and the award winner will be recognized at a public event.

The recipient of the Paula F. Goldberg Champion for Children with Disabilities Award is:

- **A VISIONARY LEADER.** The award winner is both a dreamer and a doer. They are able to look at an issue and envision a path to positive change. They take initiative, and through their vision, are able to inspire others to join together to achieve great things for children with disabilities. They not only have a vision to execute, but also a plan to succeed.
- **A TENACIOUS ADVOCATE.** The award winner is unwaveringly persistent in their advocacy for children with disabilities. They are undeterred by challenges and even failure, understanding that there are often setbacks on the road to success.
- **A TRUE ROLE MODEL.** The award winner is a person of achievement, integrity, and dedication, whose positive attitude and commitment to the cause inspires others to follow in their footsteps.

SEEKING 2022 AWARD NOMINATIONS

The deadline for nominations is August 26, 2022. A committee selected by PACER Center's board of directors will review and evaluate all nominations.

The winner of this award will be presented with \$5,000 and will be honored at PACER's Annual Benefit on November 5, 2022. They will also be recognized on PACER's website, social media, in PACER publications, and on a plaque at PACER's office.

For more information and to make a nomination, go to: [PACER.org/about/champion-for-children-award.asp](https://www.pacer.org/about/champion-for-children-award.asp) ■



Virginia Richardson continued from previous page

so much that needs doing! I read two newspapers each day. I'm into sports, especially football and basketball. I'm interested in the financial world, and I continue to learn. I work with a personal trainer on strength and balance issues." She is involved in her church, and close to her children and their families.

She has also taken on a new project: writing her life story. "I'm taking a class called 'Telling Your Own Story,'" Virginia said. "I'm a better speaker than writer, but I want to do a lot of writing about my life. I want to leave behind some written word."

She is also eager to see what's next in her life, something that has been part of her personality her whole life, Virginia says. "My sister Jessie didn't want to give up her position in our mother's arms when I was born. If she was put down, she would scream and cry. I was happy to just crawl around the floor and explore.

"I was always willing to move out in the world. I'd climb an apple tree because I wanted to look down and see what was over there. In retirement, I look forward to a very active life.

"New adventures make me excited and happy." ■

PACER Board Profile: *Gwen & Ginny Hopper*



Board members Ginny Hopper (L) and Gwen Hopper (R) pictured with Rich Hopper at PACER's 2019 Annual Benefit at the Minneapolis Convention Center

Like many members of the PACER Center board of directors, Gwen Hopper is the parent of a child (now an adult) with a disability. Megan is the fourth of Gwen and Rich Hopper's six children.

"When Megan first came home [she was adopted from South Korea], I noticed there was something different about her," Gwen said. With her first four children close in age, Gwen understood firsthand how babies and toddlers typically developed. Megan was developing differently than her siblings.

"She would cry all night, wouldn't look us in the eye, wouldn't respond to noise or play with toys," Gwen said. Megan also had a very difficult time with change, and when her shoelaces were uneven, "Megan would start screaming and wouldn't stop until they were straight. Sometimes it took three or four tries! Velcro fasteners were a lifesaver," Gwen recalled.

The Hoppers took Megan from doctor to doctor, but no one could make a diagnosis. This was in the early 1980's, when diagnoses of autism were rare. "We took her to an ear doctor, and I started crying when he told us she could hear," Gwen said. "Then [when Megan was three years old] we went to Children's Hospital, and I thought Megan did great on the exam – but they diagnosed her with autism." While the Hoppers loved their daughter just as she was, they were concerned about Megan's future. "I was worried for her, because I knew her life would be harder," Gwen said.



The PACER connection

When Megan was six years old, PACER became part of the family's life. "PACER was very supportive," Gwen said. "We attended workshops, and PACER helped with Megan's IEP [Individualized Education Program]. An advocate came to Megan's IEP meeting. She was very straightforward and knowledgeable about autism. It made a big difference for Megan."

Gwen, her oldest daughter Ginny, and Megan became involved with PACER as volunteers, particularly for the Benefit. Megan also used her graphic design skills to volunteer, and Ginny, who was then in law school, assisted with the National Bullying Prevention Center website. Gwen joined PACER's board of directors.

"A lot of people on the board are lawyers and other professionals," Gwen said. "I really think Paula asked me because as a stay-at-home mom with a special needs child, I brought another perspective. With the board, besides talking policy, we have children with so many special needs. That makes a bond, sharing what you're going through. It's a very supportive group. All of PACER is like that. Whether you're dropping off something for the Benefit or calling to ask a question, people are so nice – welcoming and dedicated."

Megan grows up

Meanwhile, Megan was making her way through school. "Megan went to Minnehaha Academy, like our other children," Gwen said. "The children in her class were wonderful to her. There was no making fun of her. Megan's always been an artist: that's her niche. The other kids always wanted to see her artwork."

Megan's graduation was just as special as she is. Gwen recalled, "The audience was instructed not to clap until the end... but when Megan received her diploma, the whole auditorium broke into applause!"

High school was not the end of Megan's academic career. "Megan went to Brown College," Gwen said proudly. "It took her six years, but she earned her degree in graphic design. Today she is an independent graphic designer."

"Megan has a great personality – people like her. She has many different interests, including news, politics, and dogs. She knows everything about individual dog breeds. She loves to talk with people about their dogs. She's had four dogs, and currently has a Havanese."

Reflecting on Megan's impact on the Hopper family, Gwen said, "I think having Megan as a sibling gave my children a lot of empathy for others. Ginny comes over twice a week and takes Megan out to lunch. Another plays video games with her twice a week. All of her siblings are very good to her. They fill a need in her life."



Gwen, Megan, and Rich Hopper

The PACER family

"I think my perspective as a sibling has been useful," Ginny said, who first joined PACER's board in 2008. "After volunteering at PACER and because PACER was in our family's life for so long, I was very familiar with PACER and its mission."

Ginny's experience with PACER helped when her oldest child was diagnosed last year with ADHD and mental health issues. "Being involved with PACER, I knew a little about how to navigate working with the school for my daughter," Ginny said. "I was lucky: a lot of people don't know where to start. I learned a lot on the PACER board so when the situation came up, I knew how to get the ball rolling." Ginny added, "The board is a great group to work with. Everyone has the same goal: helping children with disabilities reach their full potential."

For the Hoppers, PACER is a family affair. "Our family began our relationship with PACER over 35 years ago," Gwen said. "Paula Goldberg was the first person that we spoke with, and we have been friends ever since. While guiding PACER to the great organization that it has become, she never lost sight of the importance of the people who worked and volunteered for it. Paula always seemed to know everyone by their first name, and always had a warm word of encouragement. PACER will miss her, and so will the thousands of people who have had the privilege of knowing her through years." ■

Photo page 12: Gwen and Rich Hopper with their children and grandchildren: Back row, L to R: Steph, Dan, Ken, Gwen, Rich, Eddie, Tai, Terry. Front row, L to R: Ginny, Audrey, George, Henry, Sloane, Leah, Steve, Megan, Courtney, Lydia.

PACER Workshops

FREE to parents!

CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH

Mental Health Technology: De-stress and Decompress (Rebroadcast)

Mon., June 13 • 6:30 - 7:45 p.m. CDT

Part one of this two-part series on mental health assistive technology features apps and devices to help manage everyday stressors. Tools demonstrated are appropriate for late elementary-aged students and older.

Mental Health Technology: Management & Maintenance

Wed., June 15 • 1:00 - 2:00 p.m. CDT

This is the second in a two-part series that features apps and devices that can help manage distressing moments, symptoms, and assist with medication management. Tools demonstrated are appropriate for late elementary-aged students and older.

PARENT TRAINING

Parent Leadership Training

Fri., Aug. 5 and Sat., Aug. 6

9:00 a.m. - 1:00 p.m. CDT

Minnesota parents of students who are five to 20 years old and currently receiving services on an IEP (Individualized Education Program) can apply to be part of this in-depth training. Participants will learn to take their advocacy experience to the next level and work toward positive change for all children, youth, and young adults with disabilities. The training will highlight parent leadership opportunities from the district to the state level. *Details about the application process will be posted to PACER's website in June.*

Understanding Special Education Part 1: IDEA (Individuals With Disabilities Education Act) – the Big Picture

Tues., Aug. 16 • 6:30 - 7:30 p.m. CDT

Participants will gain an overall understanding of special education, the steps in the special education process, and how to request an educational evaluation.

Understanding Special Education Part 2: The IEP (Individualized Education Program)

Tues., Aug. 23 • 6:30 - 7:30 p.m. CDT

At the end of this presentation, participants will understand how a child is found eligible for special education, next steps after a finding of eligibility, the required parts of the IEP, and important parent action items after their child receives an IEP.

Understanding Special Education Part 3: What's Next?

Tues., Aug. 30 • 6:30 - 7:30 p.m. CDT

Participants will learn how to voice concerns or disagreements as an equal member of their child's IEP team, as well as the processes available to resolve conflicts and additional ways to be involved in special education.

SIMON TECHNOLOGY CENTER

Beyond Keyboards: Alternative Tools for Controlling Your Computer

Tues., June 14 • 2:00 - 3:00 p.m. CDT

Keyboards and mice are great tools but do not work for everyone. This workshop features many ways to control your computer and mobile devices: from voice control to switches, adaptive mice, and yes, keyboards! PACER staff will demonstrate several simple things to make your computer more easily accessible, as well as some more complex setups.

Video Game Accessibility

Wed., Aug. 17 • 2:00 - 3:15 p.m. CDT

This workshop will showcase video game accessibility. Presenters will cover game-specific features like closed captions and a variety of different adaptive devices that help individuals play video games.

TECH FOR GIRLS CLUB

Tech for Girls Club: 3D Printing

Sat., June 25 • 10:30 a.m. - noon CDT

Let's get printing! Participants will learn to use the Tinkercard 3D printing software. After participants ideate, design, and learn how to create 3D models for printing, they will learn about resources for printing the 3D models they created.

Tech for Girls Club: Journey Through the Stars Part 1

Sat., Aug. 27 • 10:30 a.m. - noon CDT

In Part 1 of this Tech for Girls workshop, participants will learn about long-distance space travel and what a spacecraft needs for long-distance travel.

TECH FOR TEENS CLUB

Tech for Teens Club: Building Websites

Sat., June 11 • 10:00 - 11:30 a.m. CDT

This workshop will introduce teens with disabilities to a method of designing websites using Weebly.com, and they will learn to use template designs and insert small amounts of code to customize and publish their own websites online. *This is an extension of the Coding Websites workshop, but past attendance isn't required.*

Tech for Teens Club: LEGO Stop-Motion Videos

Sat., Aug. 13 • 10:00 - 11:30 a.m. CDT

Participants will learn how to create stop-motion style videos with smooth animation using just a mobile phone (iPhone and Android) and LEGO brand toys. Participants will create their own stories and bring their characters to life!

QUESTIONS?

(952) 838-9000

(800) 537-2237

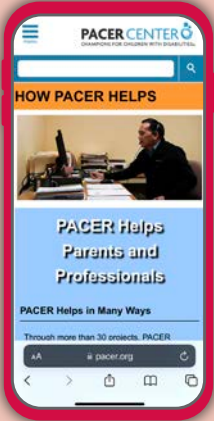
PACERworkshops@PACER.org

At this time, all PACER Center workshops are held virtually.

Visit [PACER.org/workshops](https://www.pacer.org/workshops) to register, view the most up-to-date listing, and to learn which virtual platform will be used. If you have questions contact PACER.

PACER's 2021 IMPACT:

Improving lives, one family at a time



35,015

Requests for support, assistance, and information were responded to by PACER staff



2.4 Million

Visits were made to PACER's cutting edge, interactive websites



22,093

Parents and professionals attended PACER's virtual workshops and presentations



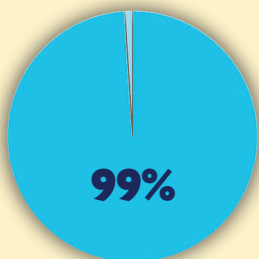
137K

copies of each issue of the Pacesetter newsletter were mailed to parents and professionals throughout the country

1.4 billion+

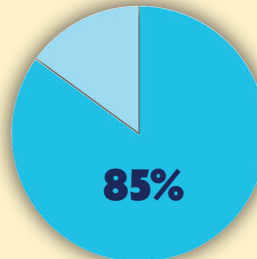


People read about PACER in online articles and on social media



PACER HELPS STUDENTS SUCCEED IN SCHOOL

99% of parents said information they learned from PACER would help them improve their child's educational outcomes



PACER IS A GOOD FINANCIAL STEWARD

85% of PACER's funds go directly to programs that help children and families. PACER's management and fundraising expenses are just 15%, well below industry standards

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PACER SYMPOSIUM

About Children and Young Adults with Mental Health and Learning Disabilities



Tuesday, August 16 | 8am - 3pm | Minneapolis Convention Center
Registration now open! \$40 fee includes lunch | CEU clock hours available

This year's Symposium features keynote speaker Anne Gearity, Ph.D. Anne is a respected speaker who has a mental health practice in Minneapolis, is an assistant professor at the University of Minnesota, and is a consultant to many school districts. Anne will speak on restoring students' wellbeing after COVID, and the benefits and challenges of being at school.

To register and for more information about the presenters and workshop sessions, visit PACER.org/symposium or call **(952) 838-9000**.

Register soon – this popular event fills quickly.