

# PACER PARTNERS

**PACER CENTER**  
CHAMPIONS FOR CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES®

Connecting families, friends,  
donors, and staff of PACER



Summer 2016  
PACER.org

Success Story  
3

Unity Awards  
4

PACER Staff  
6

Creative Kids  
7

Endowment  
8

## VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT Al Lenzmeier: PACER involvement is a family affair

When Al Lenzmeier attended his first PACER benefit, it was because he was invited by his friend and colleague, Marc Gordon, who today chairs PACER's National Advisory Board and is Chief Information Officer of American Express. The two friends worked together at Best Buy, where Lenzmeier was President and Chief Operating Officer.

After Al's grandson, Sam Broyles, was born prematurely and with Down syndrome, his interest in PACER shifted to personal involvement.

"Al is just a wonderful person," said Paula Goldberg. "He is an incredible grandfather. He helps PACER in so many ways, and he is so humble! He has a fantastic reputation in the community, and it is well-deserved. Al and Kathy's support is so important to continuing PACER's dreams and programs. We can't thank them enough for everything they do."



Al Lenzmeier, his wife Kathy, and their grandson Sam Broyles.

Volunteer Spotlight continued on page 2

When Sam was born, his mother, Jessica, called PACER from the hospital. “We knew there was a possibility that Sam would have Down syndrome but we weren’t sure,” Jessica recalled. She was worried about what might lie ahead. One of the things she remembers from the call she made from the hospital was the PACER staff advocate’s greeting. “He said, ‘Congratulations on the birth of your child!’ I wasn’t hearing that from other people.”

Jessica and her husband, Rowan, received helpful information from PACER, and then attended their first PACER workshop. “I learned about my rights as a parent,” Jessica said. “That’s SO huge; a lot of people don’t know about educational rights of children from birth to three.”

“Jessica was provided with the names of some organizations that address the needs of families of children with disabilities, but PACER was the only one that addressed all kinds of disabilities,” Al Lenzmeier said. “Jessica became involved, attending PACER workshops, learning about assistive technology and more recently, computer apps. PACER was the organization that had all of the resources to support her in terms of Sam’s future.”

Jessica soon became a PACER volunteer with the COUNT ME IN® puppet shows and serving on the Board of Directors. As she became more involved, so did her parents: Al Lenzmeier joined PACER’s Advisory Board, and Kathy has been instrumental in the success of PACER’s Annual National Symposium on Children’s Mental Health and Learning

Disabilities. The Lenzmeiers have become friends to PACER. All three are involved with PACER’s annual benefit, which Jessica has co-chaired. Today, Jessica works as a parent advocate at PACER.

“It’s a maze for parents to go through, trying to understand their rights and what lies ahead,” Al Lenzmeier said. “PACER is the go-to place for families of kids with disabilities. In

terms of Sam’s life, if it weren’t for PACER, I don’t know where we’d be or where families of children with disabilities would be. PACER helped Jessica understand what rights she has in terms of educating Sam, and the responsibilities and obligations of school systems. We are all now learning about opportunities beyond high school and how you plan for the next transition.”

“I’m very impressed with PACER’s advocacy work, too, locally and at the federal and state levels.”

Lenzmeier has worked closely with PACER Executive Director Paula Goldberg and said, “I’m very impressed with Paula’s vision, and the passion she exhibits for the cause. She’s continually refining PACER, wanting to improve it.” He specifically mentioned PACER’s National Bullying Prevention Center and PACER’s National Parent Center on Transition and Employment.

“Paula is one of those rare leaders who is able to create something and then continue to grow it.”

**PACER is the go-to place for families of kids with disabilities.**

*-Al Lenzmeier*

## Upcoming PACER Events

### **PACER’s Run, Walk, Roll Against Bullying, Oct. 1**

This fun family event kicks off National Bullying Prevention Month in October. More details can be found on page 5.

### **Unity Day, Oct. 19**

On Unity Day, schools, communities, and individuals across the world will wear orange in a giant show of support for bullying prevention. To learn more, visit [PACER.org/bullying](http://PACER.org/bullying).

### **PACER’s Annual Benefit, May 13**

Save the date! Look for more details, including who the amazing performer will be, in the winter issue of the PACESETTER.

DaSaint Forman has big, bright brown eyes and a shy smile. He doesn't speak much because of something that happened when he was an infant, and he looks for visual cues about what's being said. "DaSaint experienced Shaken Baby Syndrome and a resulting traumatic brain injury when he was eight or nine months old," explained his grandmother, Debbi Williams. "It changed his life forever."

DaSaint and his younger brother, Armani, came to live with Williams permanently when DaSaint, now 8 years old, was four. Because of his traumatic brain injury, DaSaint had developmental delays. "It affected his speech and his ability to take in information," Williams said. "For a long time, he didn't talk."

Williams knew that DaSaint would need an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), but she didn't know what her rights were when the IEP was in place. The IEP, which focused on DaSaint's problems in math and English, wasn't adequate. School staff suggested that Williams move DaSaint to a school for children with severe emotional and behavior needs.

Williams knew that her grandson was bright, and believed that DaSaint could be successful in a regular public school with the right accommodations. "I knew that he needed visual cues, and I wanted his IEP to reflect this." She tried without success to have the school alter the IEP. "I knew that we needed an IEP that was functional, that addressed the root causes of DaSaint's disabilities, but I didn't know what my rights were." Although the school was required to give Williams a copy of her rights, they hadn't done so, she said.

It was only after she called PACER and advocate Pat Anderson became involved that things began to change. "Pat Anderson is marvelous," Williams said.

Anderson's knowledge of the Minnesota Due Process Options for special education made all the difference. Anderson informed Williams of a variety of options, and within days, they were meeting with school officials and DaSaint's mental health case manager in an IEP meeting facilitated by staff from the Minnesota Department of Education.

"The school is required under law to set up a conciliation conference when a parent or guardian doesn't agree with an IEP proposal," Anderson said.

"Pat got me through it," Williams said. "Once she came on board, the school met its requirements. They became responsive; they weren't just dealing with an upset grandma, but an entity well-versed in educational procedures."

## A grandmother's love, a grandson's success



Debbi Williams and her grandson DaSaint Forman

Things turned around rapidly for DaSaint. "Once the IEP was implemented, he was finally able to get the tools that he needs, such as visual aids." Once everyone was on the same page, the perceptive, intelligent little boy sensed the difference in staff who understood that he was struggling, not willfully misbehaving.

"I don't know what we would have done without Pat, and DaSaint's teacher was awesome," Williams said.

By the end of the year, the little boy who, Williams said, "used to cling to me in the mornings after our Ojibwe prayers, saying he didn't want to go to school" told her, "I like school."

DaSaint's behavior incidents were radically fewer — some days there were none at all, and he began to do work close to grade level. He was looking forward to catching up at summer school.

At the end of the year, DaSaint's teacher recognized just eight children in the classroom with special awards. The colorful paper that DaSaint and Williams prize tells the story — "Most Improved Award: DaSaint."

# Spotlight on Kindness: PACER's National Unity Awards

PACER's National Bullying Prevention Center's Youth Advisory Board presented the second annual Unity Awards on May 25 at the Bloomington Center for the Arts. It was an exciting evening as PACER honored individuals and groups for their outstanding leadership in bullying prevention. Honorees were from Minnesota and across the nation.

"We hear hundreds of stories every year about individuals who make a positive impact and we are excited to honor a few of those amazing individuals," said Julie Hertzog, director of PACER's National Bullying Prevention Center. "The Unity Awards are a celebration to show how much we appreciate the special contributions that are being made across the country to prevent bullying."

FOX-9 reporter and anchor Leah Beno was the evening's emcee. Sixteen-year-old musical sensation Tristan McIntosh, an American Idol finalist, traveled from Tennessee to perform at the Unity Awards.



Tristan McIntosh performs during the Unity Awards.

The national honorees were:

- **Alexis Saldana**, a California eighth grader who stood up to students who bullied her during her campaign for class president. Alexis won the election and dedicated herself to building a school environment that accepts and includes all students.
- **Meredith Warren**, a Tennessee middle schooler who befriended a student who experienced panic attacks and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) after being bullied. "Meredith looked beyond her friend's disability, and gave her something that she hasn't seen before: confidence," her nominator wrote. "She is a wonderful person and has helped countless others."
- **Patricia Mastropolo**, an Arizona teacher who was nominated by a student she helped with a bullying situation. "Now I can go to school comfortably and with ease because of her," the student wrote. "She is the nicest person I know and she deserves recognition for all the kindness she has given."
- **Students from the Primary Explorers, Artists and Future Architects Club and Performing Artists in Action Club of Lockhart Elementary School**, in St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands, were nominated by a teacher who wrote: "This club practices inclusion daily, as many of the members come from other islands and know little or no English, and others have various disabilities. They are kind and helpful to their younger schoolmates and

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The Notes of Kindness Crew from Rochester, Minn. accept their Unity Award.

especially our students with special needs. They help bridge the gap between rival students by getting them involved in group activities.”

Minnesota honorees included:

- **The Notes of Kindness Crew**, sixth graders from Rochester. The girls spent two weeks writing 1,400 notes and placed them on each student’s locker. The notes included messages such as “Smile, it looks good on you” and “You are amazing in so many ways.”
- **Orono High School Unified Club**, 120 students who organize sporting events, social opportunities, academic mentoring, community awareness, and bullying prevention campaigns. The Unified Club is so successful that other schools in the area are catching on to the unified movement and the Orono students are assisting schools in starting Unified Clubs.
- **Lakeview Elementary Kindness Council**, 25 fifth grade students from Lakeville who organize and implement a variety of activities throughout the school year to promote kindness toward others. “These young people are an amazing example of how simple acts of kindness can change the climate of a school and improve learning for all,” wrote Renae Ouillette, the educator who nominated them.
- **The TEAM (Together Everyone Achieves More)**, 7-12th graders from Slayton, Minn., who organize Kindness Week every year, implement activities in their school and community, such as writing affirmations for each student and teacher, hold a Random Acts of Kindness Day, and a number of other community activities.

## Run Walk Roll AGAINST BULLYING

The 10-year anniversary of National Bullying Prevention Month kicks off on Saturday, Oct. 1 with the popular Run, Walk, Roll Against Bullying. PACER’s fun, family-friendly event mobilizes community support for bullying prevention. It will take place at Mount Normandale Lake Park in Bloomington, Minn.



Supporters are encouraged to form teams to walk, run, or roll together to raise money and awareness for bullying prevention. Those with the largest teams will have a chance to win prizes and recognition at the event!

The day begins with registration at 9 a.m., followed by a chip-timed four-mile run or a two-mile fun walk or roll (including strollers and wheelchairs). The event will conclude with a program featuring speakers, entertainment, activities, prizes, and more.

Registration, which includes an event T-shirt, is free for ages 6 and younger, \$10 for ages 7 to 15, and \$20 for adults ages 16 and older. Register today to show that the end of bullying begins with you!

For information and to register, go to [PACER.org/RWR](http://PACER.org/RWR).

## Write in PACER for your United Way pledge

Choose PACER this fall when making donations through your workplace giving (payroll deduction) campaigns. You can be a Champion for Children! Here’s how to contribute.

### United Way Donor Choice Program

On the United Way pledge card, you can write in PACER Center, 8161 Normandale Blvd., Minneapolis MN 55437 under the “Donor Choice” designation.

PACER is not a United Way agency organization and therefore doesn’t receive support from United Way’s general funds. However, PACER can still benefit from the donor choice funds when you write in PACER Center.

Name of Agency PACER Center  
 Address 8161 Normandale Blvd.  
 City Minneapolis, MN 55437

## Virginia Richardson: A hero for children with disabilities

When Debbie Richardson was diagnosed with epilepsy and cognitive disabilities in the early 1970s, her mother, Virginia, acted instinctively: “I knew I would have to be my daughter’s first and best advocate,” Virginia Richardson recalled. She did not know then that her determination to advocate for her daughter would affect thousands of Minnesota families searching for assistance for their children.

At the end of Debbie’s kindergarten year, professionals told Virginia and her husband Sam that Debbie would never learn to read or write, and they should place her in a home for children who are not able to learn. Instead, the Richardsons asked the school principal to place Debbie in the first grade with her peers, and be taught just as the other children were. To everyone’s amazement, Debbie learned to read that year. When she graduated high school, she could read and do math at a sixth grade level. “She can read a newspaper and understand most of it, and she balances her checkbook better than I do mine,” Richardson said.

Richardson’s journey of bringing the voice of parents to the special education system began with her service on the Minneapolis Public School District’s Accountability Committee, where she met Paula Goldberg. Richardson became one of PACER Center’s first volunteers, the first president of PACER’s Board of Directors, and in 1980 was the seventh employee hired. She is still with PACER 36 years later. As the Manager of Parent Training, Richardson leads a team of 15 staff advocates in their work of helping parents learn to advocate for their children.

“Virginia has removed barriers for children with disabilities, and has had a life-changing, positive effect on many thousands of families,” said PACER Executive Director Paula Goldberg. “She is an extremely effective advocate and leads in helping families access the information, resources, and support they need to be successful.”

### The voice on the phone

Richardson is often the first contact parents have with PACER. “With her profound common sense, Virginia offers



Virginia Richardson, PACER’s Parent Training Project Manager

practical information and strategies to parents who are trying to navigate the special education system,” Goldberg said, adding that Richardson provides information in a family-friendly, culturally sensitive way.

Empowerment is the cornerstone of Richardson’s daily work. She lives PACER’s philosophy of parent leadership, having witnessed many of the parents she has served becoming leaders of local committees and school boards, state task forces, and nonprofit boards. They are leaders in their communities, supporting other families in need.

Pam James, an African-American mother and grandmother, is one of those parent leaders. She had a frustrating experience with her son’s school, which didn’t recognize his ADHD as the reason he was unable to pay attention in class. “I was asked to come to school many times, and nothing changed.”

Then Virginia Richardson stepped in. She spoke with James over the phone several times, reviewed her son’s records, and accompanied her to a meeting with school staff.

“At this meeting school staff described my son’s disruptive behavior. Then Ms. Virginia asked, ‘Aren’t these the characteristics of ADHD?’ The whole room froze in time. We became united around using the special education process to help my son. We made a plan that took my son’s disability into account, and our relationship to the school became positive. My son no longer felt he was being punished for having ADHD.” The experience of working with Richardson was life changing for both James and her son.

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More than 30 children aged 4 to 17 and their families gathered at PACER Center on February 27 to participate in the 11th annual Creative Kids Contest. The young artists with disabilities used paint, pencils, and crayons to create their masterpieces, inspired by this year's contest theme of "Unity: Friendship, Inclusion, and Kindness."

It was hard to choose a winner from the many colorful, inspiring works of art. The grand prize winner, which is featured on PACER's 2016 greeting card, is Isabella Pirri's rainbow-hued drawing of two outstretched hands connected by a heart.

Isabella has an unspecified genetic condition that causes muscle weakness. Though her condition makes it hard for the 8-year-old to do the things she loves, Isabella never gives up. She is an amazing older sister to her brother Charlie, who has autism. Isabella, who plans to become an artist when she grows up, loves to read, swim, ride horses, and learn about science.

## Young Artists Compete in Creative Kids Contest

### Winning Art Featured on PACER's Annual Greeting Card

PACER presented Isabella's parents with her framed original drawing. The wonderful artwork of the nine other winners were purchased by attendees of the silent auction at PACER's Annual Benefit on April 30.

PACER's greeting card featuring Isabella's artwork is available by calling PACER Center at 952-838-9000 or ordering online at [PACER.org/help/creativeKids/creative2016.asp](http://PACER.org/help/creativeKids/creative2016.asp). A box of eight cards is \$10.



Left: Isabella proudly displays her winning artwork.

Far left: PACER's 2016 greeting card.

Continued from previous page

"This marked the beginning of my ability to navigate the school system. It set my son on the road to graduation. I realized I was not deficient but simply did not have the knowledge of my son's disability and the special education law."

### Far-reaching impact

Richardson's knowledge and experience has benefited every PACER Parent Advocate staff member. She has personally helped 15,000 families, but her reach extends to the support that staff provide to the many thousands of contacts PACER makes each year.

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

In addition to her work at PACER, Richardson has co-authored articles on special education and has been on statewide and national task forces, where she is valued as an honest and positive force for change. She is also a dedicated volunteer at her church and in community organizations.

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## PACER's endowment fund: A living legacy for children and families

A gift to PACER Center's endowment fund can make all the difference in the world for children who have a disability or are bullied, and their families. A stable endowment fund is one of the best ways possible to ensure that PACER is able to serve children and their families in the future.

### Named Endowments

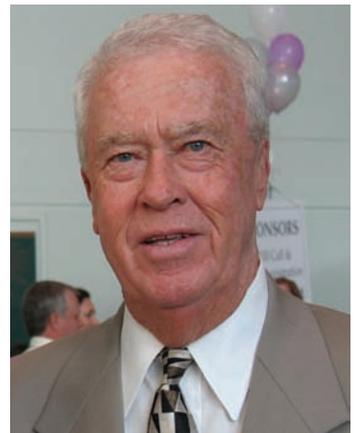
An individual can give anonymously, establish an endowment fund in their own name, or give in honor of someone else.

The David B. Goldberg Endowment Fund was established after David's sudden death on May 1, 2015. David was the son of PACER Center Executive Director Paula Goldberg and the husband of Facebook Chief Operating Officer Sheryl Sandberg. He was a highly successful entrepreneur and beloved leader in Silicon Valley. There was an outpouring of support to PACER through gifts to his endowment fund.

Derm Rowland planned his endowment. He was part of PACER for more than 30 years, and his wisdom and generosity were instrumental in PACER's success. Derm and his wife Helen included PACER in their wills, and when Derm died in 2012, his family requested that memorial gifts be made to PACER.



David Goldberg



Derm Rowland

### Other ways to support PACER's endowment fund

Planned giving offers a number of ways to support PACER. A supporter may make a one-time gift, or structure a gift to be given over a five-year period. PACER can be named as a beneficiary in a will, in retirement plan assets, or life insurance policies.

*To learn more about PACER's endowment fund and how you can donate, please call Executive Director Paula Goldberg at (952) 838-9000 or email her at [pgoldberg@PACER.org](mailto:pgoldberg@PACER.org).*