



## Tonia Teasley

**PACER's new executive director**



Tonia with Mitch, a member of PACER's Puppet Program

**T**onia Teasley, PACER's new executive director, comes to PACER from the American Red Cross, where she held the position of CEO for the Minnesota and Dakotas Region. She is a graduate of St. Olaf College and the University of Minnesota Law School. Tonia, whose twin young adult sons and stepson all have disabilities, was very familiar with PACER: she had worked with a PACER advocate, attended a PACER webinar, and was a frequent user of PACER's website. At one point, Tonia had aspired to join PACER's board of directors.

And then, last fall, she was contacted by recruiters CohenTaylor. "They asked me to network with them on their search for PACER's next executive director." Tonia couldn't stop thinking about the PACER job. "I truly understand the value of what PACER does, helping parents of children with disabilities; after all, I've used PACER services more than once.

"I thought, this is my opportunity to make a big impact on an organization with a mission I care deeply about. I picked up the phone and called the recruiter – and here we are today."

### The road to PACER

Tonia said that what she learned from every job she's held will make her a better leader for PACER. "I'm trained as a lawyer, and my experience in that field has prepared me to understand the laws and regulations that PACER teaches parents about," she said. "My training in education, and my experience in nonprofit work – learning how nonprofits serve people with so much passion and compassion – are important too. And on a personal level, having twin sons and a stepson with disabilities has really helped me understand the complexities of helping children get appropriate education, health care, and technology. I have a deep appreciation of the challenging role of parenting someone with a disability."

Tonia authored [untangletheknot.org](http://untangletheknot.org), a three-year-old blog about the challenges of navigating the systems required to help children lead healthy and successful lives. "The systems, regulations, agencies, the boatload of acronyms, and the mountains of paperwork are overwhelming, to say the least... I cannot imagine what trying to navigate

Continued on page 2

through this system would be like if I didn't have the privilege of going to college or if English were not my native language," she wrote.

### Settling in and looking ahead

It would not be an exaggeration to say that Tonia has hit the ground running. "I am trying to exercise patience, which is not my strong suit. Right now, I have to learn everything about PACER. While I don't have to do everything, I need to know who is doing what and how they do it. I'm amazed at what the PACER staff have been able to accomplish as a relatively small organization helping families. I am learning as much as I can, as fast as I can." Another priority is connecting with external stakeholders, including donors, volunteers, and community and government partners.

"I am appreciative of the wonderful work Paula Goldberg did," Tonia said. "At the same time, I recognize there are opportunities to be different going forward. PACER has been an incredible resource for families of children and young adults with disabilities. Paula created a strong foundation for us to continue to grow our impact on those families. We can reach more families, become more accessible to those families, and create long term relationships with our generous philanthropic community."

When asked how she would measure success for PACER, Tonia responded, "It comes down to how many families we can help.

"If we can find a way to reach more people and have a positive impact on their families – that will be success." ■

## Get to know **Tonia**

Tonia lives in Apple Valley with her husband, Paul Stutler. Between them, they have six young adult children, and Tonia is a proud grandmother to 7-month-old Nate.

"My work at PACER brings a lot of joy to my life," Tonia said. "When I'm not working, I enjoy traveling, pickleball, the Vikings, and trying new recipes." She and Paul both enjoy cooking, often collaborating. "We have a 16-serving paella pan, and we cook with it over an open fire in our back yard," she said.

Tonia's bucket list of places she'd like to see includes Italy and Germany. So far, her favorite travel destination has

been Norway. "I've been there twice, and it's the most beautiful place I've seen," she said. "It's even more beautiful than Hawaii."



Tonia with her husband, Paul, and their delicious pan of open-fire paella

*"With Tonia as our new executive director, the board of directors is excited for her leadership for PACER's next chapter. Her energy, focus, and enthusiasm are infectious with the PACER team and our community!"*

– PACER Board of Directors President Mark O'Leary

A Friends of PACER event

RAISE A  
*glass*  
a toast to PACER

Thursday, June 22, 2023 • 5-8 PM  
Nine Mile Brewing, Bloomington

Join PACER's new executive director, Tonia Teasley, staff, and community members as we celebrate summer and PACER's work on behalf of children with disabilities and their families. Expect a fun event featuring games, snacks, a food truck, PACER resources, and of course – beer!

QUESTIONS? Contact Debbie Andrews at 952.838.1337 or [Debbie.Andrews@PACER.org](mailto:Debbie.Andrews@PACER.org).



Tickets & info:  
[PACER.org/raiseaglass](https://PACER.org/raiseaglass)

# Spotlight on PACER's HEALTH INFORMATION CENTER

PACER's Health Information Center (HIC) works with families of children and youth with special health care needs, including chronic physical, developmental, behavioral, or emotional conditions that require health and related services beyond those that are generally needed.

The HIC provides families with the support, advocacy, and information needed to ensure their children receive appropriate medical and educational services. PACER staff help parents understand public and private health insurance options, disability certification for Supplemental Security Income (SSI), and how to develop health plans for services needed to be delivered at school. Staff also teach families how work effectively with health care professionals.

The program offers services to families over the phone and in person, through individual assistance, workshops, and print and online resources. Those who work in the HIC are parents of children or young adults with disabilities and complex health care needs, which helps them understand what parents are experiencing. "We also collaborate with health care professionals in the community, providing training and information through our medical advisory board, which includes

representatives of state and local agencies," explained Linda Goldman Cherwitz, MD, a HIC parent advocate.

The HIC works hard to promote teamwork and collaboration among families and professionals. According to Linda, "Families understand their child best. They are the caregivers, advocates, and ultimately, the decision makers. Families have information that helps professionals understand the child better and make appropriate recommendations. Professionals offer their expertise to inform the family's ability to make the best decisions for their child.

"The families we work with have children with a range of complex health issues, and the systems of care are also complex and challenging," Linda said. "We compassionately assist families in navigating these systems, and teach them how to advocate to obtain necessary resources.

***"We're here to help!"***

You can contact PACER's Health Information Center by calling 952.838.9000 or emailing [PACER@PACER.org](mailto:PACER@PACER.org). ■



***"PACER's Health Information Center promotes family-centered care and collaboration between families and health care professionals."***

- Linda Goldman Cherwitz, MD

**Parents and Residents Together (PART)** is a collaboration between PACER and the University of Minnesota. PART brings pediatric and med-peds residents (combined internal medicine and pediatrics) into the homes of families with children and youth with special health care needs and disabilities. PART provides a realistic view of the family's life in a non-medical setting, and young physicians learn what is important for parents to receive from their medical provider. Parents of children and young adults recruited for PART participate in a special training at PACER, and meet with residents two to four times a year. Residents have described this as the "most impactful experience of their residency."



Jay Jackson with sons Miles (L) and Wes (center)

## PACER board member **Jay Jackson**

Jay Jackson first learned of PACER through a “Count Me In” puppet show at his son Wes’ preschool. The puppet show’s message of inclusion resonated with Jay for personal reasons – Wes has spastic diplegia, a form of cerebral palsy. Jay learned that his wife, Teri, knew someone with a personal connection to PACER. Wanting to know more, he did some research and then emailed Paula Goldberg, PACER’s executive director at the time. “Paula invited me to come to PACER,” he said. “I took a tour, and then met with Paula to see how I could become involved. She asked me to

serve on PACER’s advisory board.” After a few years on the advisory board, he was asked to join the board of directors.

“I was really excited by the opportunity to be involved in a Twin Cities-based organization that has a national impact” – something that is important to Jay, a Minnesota native. “The broad scope of what PACER does – the advocacy, bullying prevention, assistive technology – is really impressive. PACER does so much for kids with all types of disabilities. They help people see beyond the stereotypes of disability. Children learn they’re not the only ones, and PACER helps them focus on what they can do, not what they can’t.”

### **Making a difference on PACER’s board**

As a member of PACER’s board, Jay currently serves on the strategic planning and leadership transition committees. He also served on the corporate sponsorship committee for the 2022 benefit. Jay has become more involved in board activities, he said, since Paula Goldberg’s passing.

“Everyone on the board had a connection to Paula,” he said. “She had a magnetic personality, incredible knowledge, and a great deal of influence. It was very difficult to see her pass away. We all miss her greatly.”

PACER Associate Director Gretchen Godfrey, who served as interim executive director, commented, “Jay has been an extremely valuable and engaged board member. It is clear that Jay cares deeply about the sustainability of PACER, and I have appreciated the thoughtful, practical analysis he has brought to his work on many committees.”

Jay said that in this time of transition, the board stepped up to the challenge of supporting Gretchen and hiring and working with new Executive Director Tonia Teasley. “It’s a new era for PACER, with great opportunities. PACER’s board is very strong, and I’ve seen it evolve and become even stronger. This is a great board to work with, and we’re energized as we look to the future. Our major focus is working with Tonia as we think about where we as a board and PACER as an organization can have the greatest impact moving forward.” ■

## **GET TO KNOW JAY JACKSON & FAMILY**

Jay and his wife Teri live in Saint Paul with their sons, Wes, 11, and Miles, 7. “Teri and I met on a flight from Louisiana to New York.” After college in Wisconsin and law school in Texas, Jay lived in New York and Washington D.C. before he and Teri came back to the Twin Cities to raise their family. Both Jay and Teri are lawyers: Jay with Thrivent Financial, and Teri with the IRS.

Wes was the catalyst for Jay’s involvement with PACER. “Wes was born three months early, and he weighed about two pounds,” Jay said. Wes spent his first three months in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU), and was eventually diagnosed with spastic diplegia. He’s had multiple surgeries, and has been in physical therapy off and on throughout his childhood.

Spastic diplegia is a form of cerebral palsy that most often affects premature babies, and typically impacts the legs more than the arms. That’s true of Wes, who is an excellent guitar player and gets around using a walker. He also occasionally uses arm crutches or a wheelchair. “Wes is doing great,” Jay said proudly. “He’s in the fifth grade, in regular education classes.” Like the rest of the Jackson family, he is passionate about cross-country skiing, using adaptive equipment. Wes also uses adaptive equipment for rock climbing and golf outings. “We try, as a family, to stay active,” Jay said. The Jacksons are avid fans of local sports teams, and spend as much time as possible in the summer at the family cabin.



## PACER'S DAY AT THE CAPITOL *was a rousing success*

Families, students, and PACER staff descended on the Minnesota State Capitol virtually and in person on March 23, PACER's Day at the Capitol.

The group gathered in the morning for a two-hour workshop on telling your story to legislators and a briefing on the legislation PACER was supporting, presented by Susan Einspar, PACER's public policy director and Michael Carr, PACER's public policy coordinator. "Parents of children with disabilities and students have important information and experiences to share with policy makers to impact systems change and improve outcomes for students throughout the state of Minnesota," Susan said.

Two state senators addressed the group, demonstrating bipartisan support for children with disabilities. Senator Jim Abeler is a Republican from Anoka who sits on the Senate Education Committee, and Senator John Hoffman is a Democrat from Champlin who chairs the Human Services Committee. Senator Hoffman is a former PACER staff member.

After the training and information session, attendees met with their individual legislators, including those who participated virtually. "It's great to have this hybrid format," Susan said. "It's more inclusive, and makes participation possible for those who live outside the metro or who can't make the trip to the Capitol. It was wonderful to see so many parents across the state who want to make a difference for students with disabilities." ■

### PACER priorities enacted into law

Minnesota's legislative session ended in late May, and PACER Center is thrilled that many of its policy priorities were achieved, including significant investments in education funding to reduce the special education cross-subsidy, the elimination of parental fees, and provisions to decrease the use of exclusionary discipline practices. **Look for more information from PACER this summer about how these changes will impact children with disabilities and their families.**

PACER staff readying for Day at the Capitol



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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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# Transitioning to employment or post-secondary education: Pre-ETS provides exciting opportunities for youth with disabilities

One of the most important indicators of success for youth with disabilities is working while in high school. It isn't always easy for youth to find or keep a job, or even to know what options are available to them. That's where the state of Minnesota's **Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS)**, a program of the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development's Vocational Rehabilitation Services (VRS), comes in. "We're here to help students plan what comes next after high school," said Alyssa Klein, youth services coordinator at VRS. It's easy to qualify, she said; a student with any documented disability or who is potentially eligible for VRS services can receive Pre-ETS services. In addition to high school students ages 14 and up, post-high school youth up to age 21 who meet the program's requirements are eligible to participate.

Minnesota's Pre-ETS program is relatively new; it began in 2017, three years after federal legislation created the state programs. "We were beginning to hit our stride, and then the pandemic hit," Alyssa said. While the pandemic slowed things down, now that students are back in classrooms, Alyssa's team is eager to serve them. "We really want to get the word out there that this program is available."

One of the ways Alyssa and her team are getting the word out is by working directly with schools to help identify youth who qualify for and would benefit from the program. Each public high school in the state has a counselor from the Pre-ETS program assigned to it. Interested students and families can also contact Alyssa directly.

## One student's experience

Jessen Mendiola, 15, of Madelia, Minnesota participates in Pre-ETS. His mom, Jen, learned about it from a Madelia school board member, Ryan Lais, who works for VRS as a youth services specialist. "Ryan has been phenomenal," Jen said.

Jen is equally enthusiastic about the program. "They've done a lot with Jessen," Jen said. "Testing, site and job tours, bank information about financial management, what is involved

in getting and keeping a job. The case worker is very helpful, and communicates well with Jessen."

That communication is important because it hasn't all been smooth sailing for Jessen, who has Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD). Not every job trial worked out, but even those that weren't a success helped provide information about what would and wouldn't help Jessen succeed in an employment situation.

And Jessen is currently working in a placement that is going well, Jen said. "He is doing a little of everything. This summer he will be busy! He is looking forward to that.

"I would 100% recommend this program. I would love for others to be aware of these resources."

## Tailored to student needs

Alyssa emphasized that Pre-ETS is "flexible and person-centered. There are regulations and certain things we must do, but there is a lot of leeway and flexibility about how we provide services." The services include helping a student determine areas of interest; counseling about potential jobs and training opportunities; internships or work-based learning; work readiness instruction; coaching in self-advocacy; and more. The services a student receives are tailored to their needs and interests.

*"Pre-ETS is a great example of how schools, VRS, and families can collaborate to support the employment goals of transition-aged youth."*

- Sue Fager, PACER's transition to adulthood project coordinator



“We can expose students to a lot of different opportunities. You don’t know if you like something if you haven’t seen it. One of the most beautiful things is the connections we have with businesses. We can offer tours, job shadowing, work experiences to try out. We’ll start to see themes, such as a student who really enjoyed customer contact or working with tools. We can use that information to help them look at careers or post-secondary education. It’s also okay not to make a firm decision,” Alyssa said.

Once a student is ready for a job, “we do interview coaching. We establish a rapport with the student, and we can even attend an interview if they need that level of support. It’s so important that students and families understand that we’re here to add to their planning team.

“We get to know you and the supports you may need. We are here to help you develop and implement your plan, and whether that includes post-secondary education or a job, we’re here to support you for the long haul.” ■

## Definitions of Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS)

Job Exploration Counseling	Work-Based Learning Experience	Postsecondary Education Counseling	Workplace Readiness Training	Instruction in Self-Advocacy
<p><b>Work with students to explore:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vocational interests</li> <li>• The labor market</li> <li>• In-demand industries and occupations</li> <li>• Non-traditional employment options</li> <li>• Career pathways of interest</li> </ul>	<p><b>Arranging for and providing:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Career Mentorship</li> <li>• Career Related Competitions</li> <li>• Informational Interviews</li> <li>• Internships (paid or unpaid)</li> <li>• Job Shadowing</li> <li>• Practicum</li> <li>• Service Learning</li> <li>• Simulated Workplace Experiences</li> <li>• Student-led Enterprises</li> <li>• Work Experiences (paid or unpaid)</li> <li>• Volunteering</li> <li>• Workplace Tours/Field Trips</li> <li>• Youth Apprenticeships (YA)</li> </ul>	<p><b>Assisting students with enrolling or remaining enrolled in postsecondary education or training by helping them to:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understand how to successfully transition to a postsecondary education or training program</li> <li>• Identify postsecondary education and training options</li> <li>• Understand how their career goals line up with education and training options</li> <li>• Complete steps for enrolling in a postsecondary education or training program</li> <li>• Learn about and apply for postsecondary financial aid options</li> <li>• Learn about various supports and assistive technology used by students with disabilities at college, such as where and how to get alternative formats of textbooks</li> <li>• Learn about information on course offerings, career options, the types of academic and occupational training needed to succeed in the workplace, and how post-secondary opportunities associated with career fields or pathways would pertain to a student who is currently enrolled to ensure they are on the right pathway</li> <li>• Make decisions about changing majors and/ or education or training programs</li> </ul>	<p><b>Arranging for and providing opportunities for students to learn:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communication and interpersonal skills</li> <li>• Employer expectations for punctuality and performance, as well as other “soft” skills necessary for employment;</li> <li>• Financial literacy and benefits planning</li> <li>• Job-seeking skills</li> <li>• Skills for obtaining a driver’s permit and license and how to navigate other transportation options</li> </ul>	<p><b>Arranging and providing opportunities for:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning about disability and its impact</li> <li>• Learning about/ how to request accommodations, services, supports, and assistive technology</li> <li>• Learning about personal rights and responsibilities</li> <li>• Mentoring (peer mentoring, disability mentoring, group mentoring or e-mentoring)</li> <li>• Participating in youth leadership activities offered in educational or community settings</li> </ul>

Chart located online at: <https://mn.gov/deed/job-seekers/disabilities/youth/pre-ets/pre-ets-services>

**Interested in Pre-ETS services?** Email Alyssa Klein at [allyssa.klein@state.mn.us](mailto:allyssa.klein@state.mn.us) or call her at **763.279.4374**. PACER staff can also assist families with learning more about this and other transition services and supports; email [transition@PACER.org](mailto:transition@PACER.org) or call **952.838.9000**.

Go to <https://youtu.be/VBhOmM5qhsA> for a short, informative video about Pre-ETS.

# MNSFEC forges partnerships with charter schools

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The Minnesota Statewide Family Engagement Center (MNSFEC), a program of PACER Center, has recently begun working with more charter schools. “We started out working with the charter schools where our multicultural advocates had formed relationships through their advocacy for special education students,” explained Rose Quintero, MNSFEC’s director. “Charter schools are unique in that they are often small, and have a lot of potential for great family engagement but lack the resources of district schools.” Rose said that currently six charter schools are partnering with MNSFEC. “We would love to work with more charters.”



Kazoua Kong-Thao

## Community School of Excellence

Dao Xiong, a longtime PACER multicultural advocate, was already a familiar face on the campus of Community School of Excellence, a PreK-12 Hmong language and culture school located in Saint Paul, when the school partnered with MNSFEC. In addition to Hmong students, the school, which has an enrollment of approximately 1,400 students, also serves Karen/Karenni, Hispanic/Latino, Black, and racially mixed students. “We have worked with Mr. Dao for many years, he’s been very helpful,” said Kazoua Kong-Thao, the school’s chief administration officer. “He is from the community and understands it. He speaks the language and is a bridge between families and the school. He has educated families on how they can advocate for themselves, which is a benefit because the families know he is a Hmong elder. They consider him a family member they can come to, it’s not the school telling them what to do. They call him uncle, grandpa, cousin.”

Kazoua says that in addition to making presentations, Dao has provided valuable resources for the families. “The packets with resources and information for families to take home are so helpful in helping them understand the school system and how to advocate for their children. The information for teachers is helpful too.

“Yes, I believe it has increased family engagement.”

## Excell Academy

Excell Academy in Brooklyn Park began working with MNSFEC in the summer of 2022. “Excell Academy has really enjoyed our partnership,” said Tonya Williams, the school’s diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) coordinator. “During our debut Freedom School summer last year, MNSFEC was instrumental in our collective success for our Parent Engagement Nights (PEN). Parents often commented on the wealth of information that was provided along with the abundance of resources that they were given to take home.”

Excell is a great partner for a number of reasons, including the enthusiasm of staff and the diversity of students. The PreK - grade 8 school has around 500 students, 95% who are students of color, according to Tonya; the overwhelming majority of students are East African or Black.

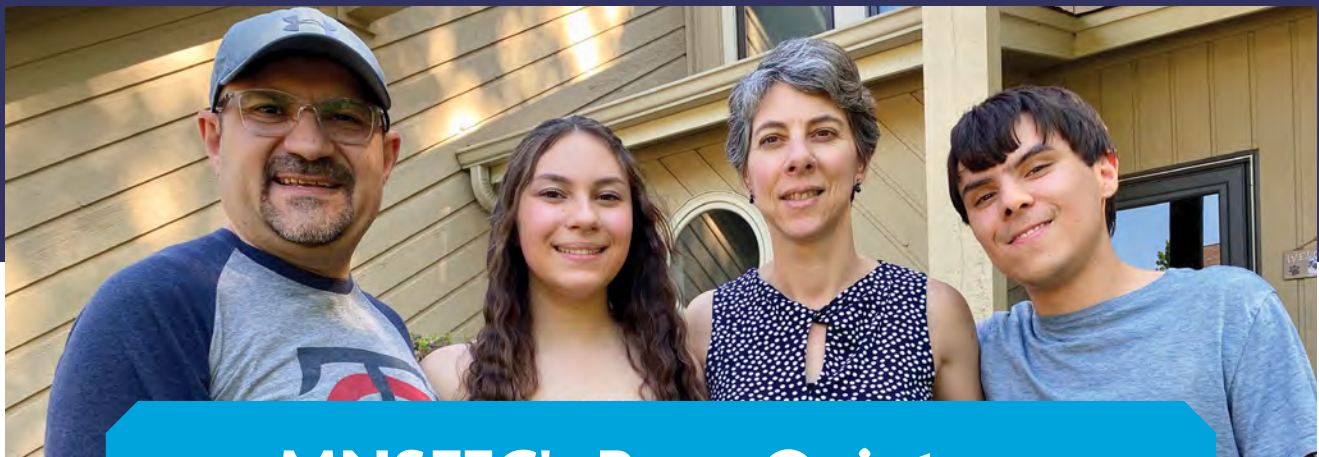
“Working with PACER has been wonderful! We have had lots of positive feedback. There’s been a wealth of information and tangible resources,” Tonya said. “One thing parents really appreciate are the record keeping folders. They’re a wonderful way to keep everything organized.



Tonya Williams

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## MNSFEC's Rose Quintero

**R**ose Quintero, the new director of PACER's Minnesota Statewide Family Engagement Center (MNSFEC), has been with PACER for more than nine years. Before joining MNSFEC, Rose was a parent advocate and trainer; like most PACER advocates, she is the parent of a child with a disability.

### Change of plans

Rose was a first-time mother in 2005 when her twins were born early, at just 24 weeks' gestation. "They were just on the edge of viability," she recalled. Rose's daughter did not survive, and it was touch and go for a while with her son, Daniel, born at just 1 pound, 6 ounces. "He had heart surgery, a brain bleed, infections, a PICC line in his head. He was in an incubator for six weeks; we could not even touch him. After about eight weeks he started to turn the corner – but he was still in the NICU (Neonatal Intensive Care Unit) for four and a half months." As hard as it was to lose a child, Rose said, "So many people lost their only child – we still had one."

Daniel's birth changed not only Rose's life, but also her career path. Prior to Daniel, her work experience was as a community organizer for the American Jewish Committee. "I think that if not for Daniel, I would have become involved in international community development work," she said. When Daniel was a toddler, Rose went to work in her native New York state, providing family training, support, and counseling to parents of toddlers and young children with developmental delays. It was a good fit for her: she was familiar with early intervention services because of her experience with Daniel.

Though Daniel has faced challenges, he has also flourished. Today, at age 18, he is an accomplished skier who is passionate about political activism. Daniel recently graduated from high school and is headed off to college in the fall. Rose's younger child, Leah, is a high school student.

### Coming to PACER

A few years after the Quintero family moved to Minnesota, Rose was working with children with autism on skill development, a part time position. "I saw the advocate job on PACER's website," she said. "I was so excited! It was my ideal job. I was always talking to the parents I knew about their rights in special education; I'd say, 'ask for this!' When I saw the job listing, I thought, 'wow – I can do this for a living?'"

"I really was passionate about working with other families, helping them gain more knowledge to advocate for their kids. I knew some of the parents were marginalized, and didn't have access to the information that could help their kids."

After she worked for more than five years as a parent advocate, Rose joined MNSFEC as the program coordinator, and earlier this year, the director. Though she was no longer working with families of children with disabilities, she was still helping families learn to advocate for their children. "This was a way for me to grow in another role," Rose said. "It felt like an expansion of what I was doing, only in general education rather than special education. Now I was focusing on working with other types of families that weren't always included: families of color, low-income families, immigrant families who were English language learners, unhoused families. These are families who face unique barriers, and there's a power imbalance. I love having the opportunity to meet families and figure out how to support them so they can help their kids, and to be able to look deeply at what is high-impact, meaningful family engagement.

PACER is an amazing organization. Everyone here is so committed to the mission and works so hard! We're all trying to do more, do better, increase the quality of assistance we provide to families.

"I'm so happy to be part of this work." ■

(Photo above: Rose Quintero with husband Ronald, daughter Leah, and son Daniel)

# Sonia R. Smith

## Minnesota's director of special education

Sonia Smith is the new director of special education at the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE), but she is not new to the Department – she was previously the director of assistance and compliance. Sonia is excited about the opportunities her new role offers. “This is something I aspired to do, which includes making an impact on students receiving special education at a higher level,” she said.

### The road to her new job

“Everything I’ve done in my life led me to this space,” Sonia added. “I could not have created a better position to use my education and experience.”

Sonia’s educational background includes three master’s degrees and a juris doctorate (law) degree. She has taught elementary, middle, and high school, and worked in school administration in three states, including Minnesota.

It is clear the phrase “making a difference” is more than words to Sonia – she is dedicated to the needs of families and children. On a personal level, she said, “I’m the parent of two children. One struggled through school until we figured out how to meet their specific academic needs. And I was working in special ed! It was during that time I realized how difficult it can be for families to navigate the educational system. That’s why it’s important for families and districts to work closely together. Working together helps us to keep the main thing – the main thing. And the main thing is the kids.

“I’ve witnessed families struggling trying to help do what’s best for their students, and it just shouldn’t be that hard. I also know that districts want to work with families. They understand they can’t ignore any child’s needs, nor do they want to, so working together to educate all children – and all means all – is the only option. I also understand work needs to be done

for this to happen, but I believe that the village will somehow work together to do what’s best for students.”

### Communication is paramount

Sonia is comfortable asking questions, and doesn’t feel she always needs to be the one with the answers. Communication is one of her top priorities. “I think the division’s role is to be constantly communicating with community partners – families, districts, advocates. We are trying to be more open in leading the way in these discussions – asking questions and seeing where we can make a difference by offering community engagement opportunities. We need and want input so that we can do what’s best for kids,” she said.

“My desire and vision, as part of those conversations, is to help elevate voices that have been silenced or excluded, so that those individuals and groups are not only heard, but seen, recognized, and acknowledged through action.”

### Challenging times

One of the major challenges facing MDE and the teaching profession as a whole is the shortage of qualified teachers. “It’s going to take a village to figure this out. Keeping great staff has become a battle, and it’s not just about pay. Some of the many questions circle around teacher safety,” Sonia said.

Regarding the needs of students in special education in the face of staffing shortages, Sonia is adamant that the students’ needs are paramount. “Staffing shortages are not an acceptable excuse for not providing a child with FAPE,” Sonia

said. (FAPE, or free appropriate public education for students with disabilities, is a requirement under the federal special education law, and includes the school’s responsibility to meet the child’s needs.)



Sonia Smith

*“My desire and vision is to help elevate voices that have been silenced or excluded, so that they are seen, heard, recognized, and acknowledged through action.”*

*“You want the best for your student, and it can be a struggle to get to that... It just shouldn’t be this hard.”*

“Most often, school districts want the opportunity to work with families to ensure that FAPE is being provided,” she said. “If the parent feels the district is not doing enough, the first thing we want to see happen is a conversation between the families and the schools. If there continues to be concerns, there is a complaint process through MDE. If parents are unsure about their options, they can contact MDE’s technical assistance line and talk to someone or send an email to our general box designated for complaints. I recognize that many find the idea of working with a state agency to be intimidating.

“This is where we rely on partners like PACER to walk alongside the parent to show them what options are available and act as a bridge between home and school. Advocates have great relationships with families, and we hope they have a relationship with the schools so that when it’s time to come together to support the student, the advocate can help provide guidance to the family in a way that helps lead to a successful outcome for the student.”

**Editor’s note:** PACER can help with resolving issues with the school district. Call a PACER advocate at 952.838.9000, or email [PACER@PACER.org](mailto:PACER@PACER.org). PACER’s website also has a number of publications about every aspect of the dispute resolution process at [PACER.org/publications/disputeresolution.asp](http://PACER.org/publications/disputeresolution.asp).

## The importance of parents in special education

Sonia is a firm believer in parental involvement. “I encourage parents to communicate with their student’s district, and ask districts to be more transparent in sharing their data. If parents think there is an issue, I hope they will engage in conversations and ask for data to address their concerns. That way, they have the opportunity to question discrepancies or gain clarity regarding what’s happening at school.”

She hopes to break down the barriers between MDE and parents. “I want parents with children in special ed to know this: we see them. We hear them. We are working hard to ensure their voices are heard and the community engagement opportunities offered by our special education division is one method we use to connect.

“Again, it takes a village – and parents for sure are an important part of the village.” ■

### MNSFEC and charter schools continued from page 8

“Parents and staff have been really encouraged by MNSFEC. PACER is very reputable as well and that is important.

“One parent came to our summer program that MNSFEC participated in. They said that because of the information and resources Sharman [Davis Barrett, MNSFEC’s co-director] provided, they felt ‘so supported,’ so prepared to go into the next school year, equipped and front loaded with information and resources. Because of MNSFEC, she enrolled her children in our program for the fall.

“There is a great rapport and equity. I feel so secure and so seen and so supported by MNSFEC and Sharman.

“Thank you for this tremendous opportunity.” ■

Contact MNSFEC today for more information or to request resources available to families and educators!

Email: [MNSFEC@PACER.org](mailto:MNSFEC@PACER.org)  
Website: [PACER.org/fe](http://PACER.org/fe)

## ABCs of charter schools

Charter schools are independent (non-district) public schools of choice. Minnesota’s 181 charter schools serve approximately 67,000 PreK - grade 12 students. There are also 57 charter schools with early learning programs. Charter schools are open to all, and offer unique educational programming. Minnesota was a pioneer in the charter school movement: the first-ever charter school opened in Minnesota more than 30 years ago.

## About MNSFEC

MNSFEC works to increase family engagement in education for all families across Minnesota, with a particular focus on addressing the needs of families from low-income and diverse communities. Staff provide a variety of free services, such as workshops, webinars, professional development for educators, presentations, and written resources which are available in four languages. MNSFEC helps families, educators, and communities learn how to build stronger partnerships and communicate more effectively.

# EMBRACING AUTISM:

*Jillian Nelson's success story*



Jillian Nelson

Jillian Nelson's autism diagnosis was life changing. It was years in coming, and it almost didn't happen. If not for her little brother's diagnosis, it's likely that Jillian's life would be very different today.

## School days

"When Jillian received her ADHD diagnosis at age six, it was the 1990s, and girls were rarely diagnosed with autism," said Maggie Griffith, Jillian's mother.

After Jillian's diagnosis, Maggie contacted PACER for help. "My mom was a single mom, and she went to PACER because she was having trouble getting the school to support me in any way that was effective," Jillian explained. Maggie worked with a PACER parent advocate who helped Maggie understand her rights and what accommodations were reasonable to expect from the 504 Plan the school offered.

"PACER was absolutely very helpful," Maggie said. "I didn't understand the issues or where else to turn."

Still, school was a struggle for Jillian. "In the 1990's, it was hard to get an IEP (Individualized Education Program) for ADHD," Maggie said. "A 504 Plan was the best we could do for a long time." It wasn't until Jillian's sophomore year in high school that she qualified to have an IEP. Her school decided she had an emotional behavioral disorder (EBD)," Maggie said.

**Editor's note:** *While a 504 Plan allows for accommodations, IEPs offer more protections to ensure students with disabilities make meaningful educational progress.*

Even though the EBD diagnosis was incorrect, the IEP made a huge difference. Jillian had been failing in school, and with the accommodations provided in the IEP, she completed four years of credits in two years, and graduated on schedule. "It was a pretty big game changer," Jillian said. "Without the IEP, I would never have graduated."

## Falling through the cracks

"I worked really hard to graduate, and then I fell through the cracks after high school," Jillian said. "The school never suggested college or a transition program. I was out of their hands, and they didn't care what happened next."

The next few years were turbulent ones. And then, when she was 21, her three-year-old brother was diagnosed with autism. "I was really, really surprised at his diagnosis," Maggie said. "His symptoms were like Jillian's, and I expected he would be diagnosed with ADHD too. When he was diagnosed, the doctor suggested that Jillian be evaluated."

Jillian said, "When I was diagnosed, I was a homeless drug addict. I had just gotten clean; I was going through rehab and living in a shelter when I got the diagnosis. I refused to acknowledge it. I didn't tell anyone, and I resisted anything related to autism."

After living in Chicago for a few years, Jillian decided to come home to Minnesota. When she asked her mom if she could live at home and go to college, Maggie had one condition: she wanted her daughter to complete Partners in Policymaking, a leadership and advocacy training program for adults with disabilities and parents of children with developmental disabilities.

It was an amazing experience, Jillian said. "I drank the kool-aid after the first session. Partners teaches people everything they need to know about how to change the world."

## AuSM

After a series of positions in the nonprofit and for-profit sectors, Jillian ended up working at AuSM (Autism Society of Minnesota). "I was hired to be the receptionist. It wasn't the best utilization of my talents, and I wasn't spectacular at it," she said. "But instead of trying to fit me into the job, they built a job around me."

***“I first met Jillian several years ago when we were both testifying at the Minnesota legislature on some concerning special education bills. She is a wonderful self-advocate and community leader, and it’s rewarding to know that PACER played a role in helping her and other students with disabilities achieve their potential.”***

**– PACER Associate Director Gretchen Godfrey**

“My title is Community Resource and Policy Advocate. I am the lead staff on public policy work and lead staff in Washington D.C. and at the Minnesota Capitol. I also take calls from families who are looking for information and resources. And I curate and help run AuSM’s bookstores.

“I also do public speaking and trainings. There’s a lot of variety. I have my dream job!

“I love that I get to be a calm voice for families and individuals when they’re facing really challenging situations. I get to take their perspectives and go to the Capitol and help change things so that people can live their best lives, valued and supported in their communities.

“I can hopefully help make a world that’s better for all young people with autism, so they don’t have to go through the things I did that led to making bad choices.”

Jillian has an almost encyclopedic knowledge of disability services and systems, and she has an extensive list of the changes that are in process and yet to come. One of her proudest achievements was helping pass legislation that created Minnesota’s police training on autism, the most innovative anywhere.

Outside of work, Jillian is a theatre buff (“I once saw three Broadway plays in a 36-hour period”) and a Minnesota Lynx season ticket holder. “I like to be out and about, doing things,” she said, before bringing the conversation back to her work.

“I love what I do. Every day is so much joy!” ■

## Subscribe to PACER’s E-Newsletters!

### **PACER’s E-news**

PACER’s main newsletter keeps you up-to-date on what’s new at PACER, including special events.

### **PACER’s Minnesota Statewide Family Engagement Center E-news**

This newsletter provides parents and professionals with the latest tips, tools, and resources for supporting family engagement with schools in the general education setting.

### **PACER’s National Bullying Prevention Center E-News**

This newsletter provides practical tools and resources, inspiring stories, and breaking news about bullying prevention.

### **PACER’s National Center on Transition and Employment E-News**

The “Inspiring Possibilities” newsletter features resources and strategies to help youth achieve their post-school goals with support from their families and others.

**Go to [PACER.org/newsletters](https://www.pacer.org/newsletters) or call 952.838.9000 to subscribe to these valuable resources.**



Grace Grell



Cara Montgomery



Akeelah Sanders



Christopher Truffer

# NATIONAL BULLYING PREVENTION CENTER'S 2023 UNITY AWARD WINNERS

**P**ACER is pleased to announce the recipients of the 9th Annual Unity Awards, which recognize individuals and groups that empower others to take action, advocate for those who need support, or share acts of kindness that make positive change and inspire their communities.

“It is a privilege to be able to spotlight these inspiring students, educators, and community leaders who are leading the way to make our world kinder, more inclusive, and more accepting,” said Julie Hertzog, director of PACER’s National Bullying Prevention Center.

## INDIVIDUAL RECIPIENTS

**Grace Grell** is a 2023 graduate of St. Cloud State University in Minnesota, who earned degrees in psychology and communication studies. She plans to become a therapist for families of children with disabilities. Grace, who became blind as a toddler as a result of cancer, faced intense bullying in school. She uses her personal story to advocate for people with disabilities as a volunteer and public speaker. Grace has been involved with PACER Center, Special Olympics Minnesota, and the Make-A-Wish Foundation. She is a determined change maker for people with disabilities.

**Cara Montgomery**, a behavior interventionist and former special education middle school teacher at West Ottawa Public Schools in Michigan, led the creation of a Unified Basketball Team, partnering students with disabilities with peer student athlete mentors. The team has become an integral part of the school, inspiring a shift in the school’s culture; their games and events draw large crowds. Cara is also responsible for a mentorship program that matches students with disabilities with their typical student peers. Cara’s leadership has created values of acceptance and inclusion at the school.

**Akeelah Sanders** of Arizona is just 13 years old, but is already making an impact in her community. Akeelah’s personal story includes challenges such

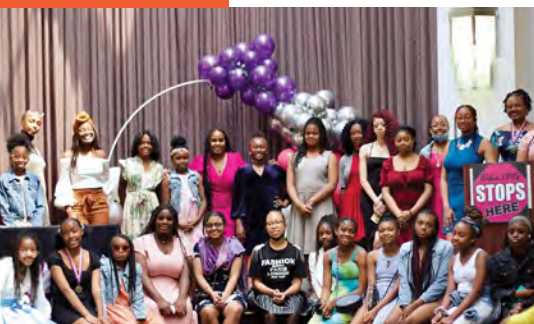
as abuse, neglect, and being placed in the foster care system. She is an active volunteer: serving the homeless, creating dress kits for Dress A Girl Around the World, raising funds for nonprofits like Kitchen on the Street and the Ronald McDonald House, and many more. Akeelah’s social media campaign, #KindLikeKeelah, and her speeches to elementary students focus on kindness and bullying prevention.

**Christopher Truffer**, Regional Assistant Superintendent at Anne Arundel County Public Schools in Maryland, leads the schools’ bullying prevention efforts, chairing a committee on bullying at the middle school level. Chris meets with students to ensure the committee hears directly from those they serve. His committee has instituted district-wide Unity Day celebrations, School Kindness Cup Competitions, and Upstander campaigns, ensuring that all the County’s middle schools institute bullying prevention practices. Currently the committee is focusing on cyberbullying and educating parents on healthy social media usage.

## ORGANIZATIONAL RECIPIENTS

**Manage Emotions Avoid Negativity Girls Inc., aka M.E.A.N. Girls Empowerment (MGE)**, serves girls in high-risk communities on the south side of Chicago and surrounding communities through mentoring and community outreach. MGE works to prevent bullying and help girls to build self-confidence and pursue their goals through perseverance, courage, and creativity. Increased self-esteem and positive attitudes toward school and social relationships is reported by 98% of participants, and 95% report positive behavioral changes. MGE has helped girls with college success, managing their emotions, and gaining life skills.

**Peer Initiative Leaders of Tomorrow (PILOT)**, a student group at Sam Houston High School in Louisiana, works to end bullying and support youth mental health needs. PILOT trains students in peer mentoring; they learn to intervene in bullying situations and offer emotional assistance through confidential, one-on-one peer sessions. PILOT is especially active during October (National Bullying Prevention Month), with activities including hosting a bullying prevention night at a school’s football game and volunteering with the local police bullying prevention walk. ■



M.E.A.N. Girls Empowerment (MGE)



Peer Initiative Leaders of Tomorrow (PILOT)

# PACER Workshops and Resources

[PACER.org/workshops](https://www.pacer.org/workshops) has the most up-to-date listings, full descriptions, and registration information. Workshops are currently held in person, virtually, or hybrid. Questions? Contact [Workshops@PACER.org](mailto:Workshops@PACER.org) or call 952.838.9000.

## ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY WORKSHOPS

### AT Supports for Math

Wed., June 21 • 2 - 3:15 p.m. CT • Virtual

In this workshop for all skill levels, participants will learn about tools that help build math skills.

### Managing Money: Tools to Increase Financial Independence

Wed., July 12 • 2 - 3 p.m. CT • Virtual

This workshop for parents and consumers will showcase tools that help to develop money management skills to support independent living. Tools will focus on understanding and counting money, planning a budget, and tracking money spent.

## EARLY CHILDHOOD WORKSHOPS

### Communication with School Staff in the IFSP Process

Tues., July 18 • 6:30 - 8 p.m. CT • Virtual

Families of young children with Individualized Family Service Plans (IFSPs) will learn skills to effectively communicate with the other members of their IFSP teams so the IFSP reflects their concerns and priorities and the strengths and needs of their child.

### Getting Ready for My Child's Individualized Education Program (IEP) Meeting

Tues., August 15 • 6:30 - 8 p.m. CT • Virtual

This workshop for parents of children ages 3 to 5 will help prepare families for active participation in developing their child's IEP.

## TECH FOR TEENS CLUB WORKSHOPS

### Tech for Teens Club: Web Development Part 1 – HTML and CSS

Sat., June 24 • 10 - 11 a.m. CT • At PACER & virtual

In this Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) workshop, teen participants will learn the basics of website development and craft their own webpage using HTML and CSS. Attend one or both workshops in this Tech for Teens series. This workshop was rescheduled from June 17.

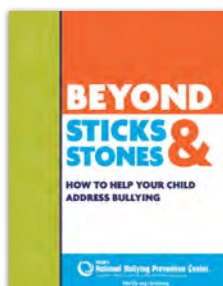
### Tech for Teens Club: Web Development Part 2 – JavaScript

Sat., June 24 • 11 a.m. - Noon CT • At PACER & virtual

In part 2 of this STEM workshop, teen participants will learn more advanced website development skills and tools including learning to code JavaScript. Attend one or both workshops in this Tech for Teens series. This workshop was rescheduled from June 17.

## NEW RESOURCES

For a complete listing of PACER resources, visit: [PACER.org/publications](https://www.pacer.org/publications) or call 952.838.9000.



### Beyond Sticks and Stones: How to Help Your Child Address Bullying

A 70-page comprehensive guide offering prevention strategies for children, and the information and practical tools adults need to take action to address and prevent bullying.

\$10 • Updated 2023



### Cyberbullying Prevention 101 Quick Guides

A three-version series with audience relevant content for elementary, middle, and high school students and adults outlining how cyberbullying is defined, and information on how to prevent and address it.

Free download • New 2023

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**PACER's  
 SYMPOSIUM**

*on Students with Mental Health  
 and Learning Disabilities*

This year's symposium features keynote speakers **Sheletta Brundidge** and **Charlene Myklebust, Psy.D.**

Sheletta is an Emmy Award-winning comedian, radio host, television anchor, newspaper columnist and best-selling author. She is also the mom of children with autism, and founder of ShelettaMakesMeLaugh.com, an online podcasting company that provides culturally competent commercial production.

Charlene is president and educational leadership consultant with EQ Learn, LLC, and Stone Arch Learning, LLC. Her background includes regular and special education teaching, public school administration, treatment and correctional education administration, and provision and oversight of mental and chemical health services in schools.

Parents, educators, administrators, and other professionals will learn strategies to effectively support students at school and at home. For more information and details about all workshops sessions, visit [PACER.org/symposium](http://PACER.org/symposium).

**August 16, 2023**

**8 a.m. - 3 p.m.**

**Minneapolis  
 Convention Center**



**Register NOW!**

[PACER.org/symposium](http://PACER.org/symposium)  
 952.838.9000



**Sheletta Brundidge**



**Charlene Myklebust, Psy.D**