

HELAINÉ FALLIN: My name is Helaine Fallin, and I am here representing, actually, a couple of organizations: The Long Island Families Together, which I'm on the Executive Board; Long Island Parent Technical Assistance Center, which is funded through the State Education Department in New York State; and I also work under the Model Transition Programs, also a grant funded under New York State and various others that I do some consulting on. Basically, my role is professional development and parent trainer. My background is social work, and I am the parent of two children with disabilities.

I feel very lucky that I had crossed the path of the IDEA Partnership. I think if I was to explain why I am in the field, I would have to say it was the result of negative experiences that I had as a parent and that my child was having in school. I reached out to looking through books and online to try to find help for my own children and, in turn, connected with some of the State Advocacy Associations, particularly the Commission of Quality of Care in New York State who then connected me with the IDEA Partnership. Basically, the Partnership allowed me – gave me an opportunity – to have my voice heard. I was invited to attend a conference. They supported me at that time as a parent. My work was in private practice, and we had what they called an inclusion conference at the time in New York State. The Partnership basically said, 'you know, we will support you financially to come to this meeting and learn about communities of practice if, in turn, you would agree to work with us in some capacity and help us to maybe reach some of our outcomes and goals. How I normally describe that now is, from that day forward, I was shot out of a cannon on the day I met Joanne Cashman and Patrice Linehan and their staffs.

The Partnership not only gave me an opportunity to have a vision, but it gave me hope to feel that I could really impact systems change as an individual who believes in systems change. They have given me the tools, the support and the mentoring to take my work to another level. So it is really because of the Partnership that I closed my practice and started working in this field full time, and I have been doing that now for about a year full time. I personally see tremendous systems change. It is hard for people to – you know, when I speak with parents, often it is hard for them to understand that because I think sometimes as a parent and as a family member we are often stuck within our own little situation, whatever that may be. It is hard to see out of the box. One of the things I work very hard on is to work with school districts and their staffs to understand what it may be like to be a family living with a child with a disability. I personally, and not just in my own time but in the last 8 years, I have seen tremendous change in districts and families and service providers and administrators coming together at the same table having discussions – equally respected discussions. I certainly don't take credit for making that change, but I think I have had a piece of it in trying to get administrators especially to understand why sometimes emotion comes along with family.

The Partnership has given me, again, the support, the mentoring, the validation. You know, although, again, I am now working actually in positions; I am the training coordinator for the Long Island Parent Technical Assistance Center and, as I said, a

senior trainer for one of the other projects funded through the State of New York. One of the things the Partnership has allowed me to do is to have access to best practice around the country; I mean, incredible access, and to be having conversations on conference calls and web conferences and interacting on the work site really with people around the country who have had success, challenges, barriers, and to be able to share those experiences and bring them back to New York State in some capacity and to the local level also. I was asked to do a presentation with a small team. We have the New York State Learning Community on family and school collaboration that came from the evolution of the Partnership. The Partnership has continued to support that learning community in particular. We have approximately 130 members. We have once-a-month conference calls. We have New York State Education Department which has committed to be on that conference call with us. They provide us with updates and what's going on. We are able to ask questions. It is family, school districts, service providers and various people. Through that learning community, we were asked to present at the Counsel of Special Education Administrators and the Long Island Counsel of Special Ed Administrators; absolutely groups that we might not have had access to, again coming back to talk about creating agreement, effective communication, communities of practice; really just that over-arching philosophy of working together. So I think that the Partnership has given us access to those groups. We have presented at the New York State School Boards Association.

It is interesting because I do many different trainings on many different subjects, but I always find myself coming back to that same root in my work. We all just have to figure out how to get along. If we can put our own personal stuff aside, you know, we can usually get to the solution. I have personally developed a grass-roots Community of Practice on Long Island where I have come just using the knowledge that I learned from – I had attended Etienne Wenger's workshop at one of the Partnership meetings and from the work that I have done with the Partnership and my understanding and my training in the concept of Community of Practice, we have developed the grass-roots Community of Practice where we have brought together – we have about 13 communities already in just a couple of months – that have agreements that they will help each other in any capacity that they can. But, I have a vision of that expanding to be much larger.

So, personally, I think what I bring to the Partnership really – to go back – is just belief and really, you know, helping to make a systems change with the passion that I have. So I think we would look at better outcomes in successful young adults. For me one of the things, certainly, and part of the transition community, is to understand that transition can't start at 12<sup>th</sup> grade; it has to start in preschool. We need to look at transition as an outcome for life. And, of course, we are looking at graduation rates and drop-out prevention. I think, for me, the change will occur when we can get to have the conversation with everyone. I think, for me, one of the best access points again has been through the superintendent's conferences. When you can have 300 people in a room and you can talk about – just touch on disability awareness and try to bring a little heart into what their brain may be feeling and what their frustration may have been with children in special education, I think we start to see a change in the mindset. So, if I was

to say to you, again, transition success, drop-out prevention and better graduation rates, I think disability awareness that we could get out to that community and get them to understand – get the community in general as best that we can to understand – why every child has a right to be safe and every child has the right to be educated to whatever capacity they are able to. I think that's hard to say. You mentioned that students – that we may have to wait a while to see change in students, but I believe that we are seeing the change in the students now because one of the things that we have done through the Partnership and the work certainly in the transition community but even in just the concept again that every stakeholder is just as important and, most importantly, youth.

What we have been able to do is work with students and with youth to get them to have the self-confidence to stand up for themselves and to have the faith and the belief in themselves to say, 'you know, I have a disability, a difference, but I am really good at this. I have lots of strengths, too.' So I have to say, I think we are seeing that change within the student population, and one of the things we need to see are positive outcomes that we are looking for in the future is to build that self-confidence in our students. And I say that both as a parent and as an educator, a professional, because it was a tough thing to learn as parent; parents still have tough times saying I have a child with a disability. So, once our community starts to be more accepting – and, again, I will bring it back to the Partnership because that is what the Partnership lives and breathes – is that we are all equal in some capacity. It doesn't matter who you are or what table you sit at, I love, you know, Billy is constantly saying, the quote comes back to say, 'If you want to be at the table, you are welcome.' That's a great feeling.

We were actually, through one of our projects, able to create some power points that we have that we could share, certainly, through some of the transition programs. But I think so; I think we could make that arrangement. It is very funny how, when a student creates what we've done – you know, we have created these little power points, and we invited the students to go to their CSE meetings and use them to talk about their strengths. They are so excited about the concept of being able to talk about themselves in a positive way in a professional setting that they were very anxious to get the word out; they were very proud of their product. So I think we could arrange that. There have been at many past meetings or conferences; I thought one of them was here but then she introduced herself and I thought one of the younger girls was a student, but she introduced herself in a professional role, but I was going to say maybe she rolled over, I don't know.

The future plans, I believe, of the Partnership, which is to engage more of the true policy makers, I think is going to be the key. I know they are talking about the next Partnership meeting where they will have the state directors there and Community of Practice will be the focus of the meeting. We've got to get the buy-in from our policy makers on both federal and state levels, and I think, I think from what I read and I hear and I listen to our administration here and the Obama Administration that this is change from the bottom up. So, I want to believe that everything is kind of running parallel right now going in the right direction. So, no, I have to tell you, as I say, I see the growth of

mentors; I leave, I come to a Partnership meeting, and I feel that I have been in a retreat. I have never once come and not felt like I am really leaving empowered and full of the energy that it may take to kind of break down some of those brick walls. As I said, it's empowerment, it is self-retreat. I am a life-time learner, and I certainly learned from everybody here. I would never think to miss it, John, honestly; I have to tell you. I keep coming back because it keeps helping me again to have the strength and the validation and the tools to try to break through some of the barriers that are longstanding; they have been in existence for so many years that without the support that we get from this level and from Joanne and Bill Easton, you know, the support that comes from the Partnership has helped us come down to a state. Again, I say it goes down to a state level and down to a local level. I have always said it doesn't matter if it is state education or down to the town governments and dealing with disability issues or down to the local school boards. It is trying to gather the work together and stay strong.

I facilitate a few of the learning communities, and I have a commitment, for sure. Having strong leadership is important, but I think shared leadership – it has to be shared leadership – and what we call in some of the communities that I am involved in is a 'no guilt' clause, which basically means, 'do what you can and we understand if you can't' or 'come back when you have the time.' And, because of that, I think it has given people the opportunity in this busy world – both professionally and in our families – it has given us the opportunity to always be able to jump in. We can always jump on a call, and it is never, 'where have you been?' It is always 'That's great; it is so good to hear from you.' That's huge. I think whatever level we're at, what I say to people when I am trying to work with the local, we have the state community and now the local community practices – it doesn't matter. You can come in once a year. You can send a card, read our minutes; whatever it is that is going to help you to feel connected and, in turn, help us to build capacity, then you are doing your job. I mean, we are just reaching to places we never thought. When you see our New York State learning community, in particular, has members from Montauk and from all across Long Island to New York City, Queens, Westchester, Rochester, Albany, Buffalo. We have work groups that are stemmed, and it all began with just a learning community that spoke once a month. Now we have four work groups that also have conference calls once a month. We have work plans. We have written grants together. We are in the process now of putting forth a pilot project and this stemmed out of the work groups from the Partnership Learning Community. So it is a tremendous outreach I think.