

GACEC Executive Director Retiring

The Governor's Advisory Council for Exceptional Citizens (GACEC) would like to inform all stakeholders in the Delaware disability community of the retirement of Executive Director Wendy S. Strauss as of April 31, 2021.

Wendy's role as Executive Director started twenty-three years ago. Running a state agency is not always easy, but the GACEC has grown under her guidance and direction. Wendy worked on numerous pieces of legislation with the Council and other disability advocates that positively impacted the lives of individuals with disabilities. She was instrumental in working with key stakeholders to get the Speech-Language Program in Delaware. Wendy and the Council led the team on the Seclusion and Restraint guidelines for the Department of Education and facilities. Another of her life-changing works was establishing School Resource Officer legislation requiring guidelines and training for school resource officers working with students in special education.

Ann Fisher, the Chairperson of the GACEC Council, shared, "The GACEC wishes Wendy well on her retirement. We thank her for her many years of dedicated service and unwavering support for individuals with disabilities and their families. Her knowledge, experience, and guidance through the years have been invaluable. She will truly be missed."

Wendy worked on creating disability awareness at the public school level, in childcare and preschools by focusing on disability history and the disability rights movement. The initiative resulted in House Bill 123 proclaiming October as Disability History and Awareness Month in Delaware and HCR 33

to present Disability History and Awareness Month in childcare settings. The GACEC instituted a Disability History and Awareness Month Poster Contest. Students from across the state created works of art depicting specific topics people with disabilities face. The GACEC worked with many partners and schools across the state to have a book and coloring book developed and printed to share statewide. A curriculum was designed around the book and coloring book for preschool teachers and childcare providers to introduce friends with various abilities to their students as part of Disability History and Awareness Month.

Brian Hartman, a colleague for 33 years, said, “Wendy was an inspiring advocate for kids throughout her career. She earned respect for her diplomacy and “people” skills – she could professionally promote a cause without alienating others. I’ll never forget the many days (and sometimes nights!) spent together in Legislative Hall advancing a myriad of bills and initiatives. When we faced roadblocks, she could always be relied upon to offer practical, level-headed advice on a path forward. Wendy should take pride in her long tenure with the GACEC and her overall legacy as someone who improved the lives of countless Delawareans.”

A State Transition Task Force for Emerging Adults with Disabilities and Special Health Care needs was established by SCR 34 in 2012. The Task Force, Co-chaired by Teri Hancharick, then Council Chair and Wendy Strauss, addressed the need to review transition using a holistic approach. From the Task Force work and support from agency stakeholders, GACEC created the transition website Delaware Disability Hub (www.deldhub.com).

Terri Hancharick, past Chair said, “I met Wendy many years ago when I was invited to the GACEC retreat as a panelist to talk about how inclusion is not always the best practice. Boy, was I wrong! Wendy was one of the people who taught me about inclusion, the importance of friendships, and the importance

of belonging to the community. Wendy has a very gentle way of getting her point across. She puts everyone ahead of herself. So I hope she will use this time to selfishly do what she wants to do. After a lifetime of advocating for families and kids with disabilities and caring for her family members along the way, it's time for Wendy. She always had time to take my phone calls, give advice and find resources for people that needed help."

Wendy was instrumental in bringing together a team to create the Boundless theatrical production, which documented a march from Wilmington, DE to Washington D.C. of people with disabilities and supporters. The show was a massive success due to the professional talent working behind the scenes and people with disabilities who acted in the play.

An Oral Health Program called Brushing for Brighter Smiles, made possible by a grant from Public Health, was created under Strauss's direction to teach children about oral hygiene. The interactive program was presented to hundreds of elementary students and preschool children ages three to five.

For a decade, the GACEC organized the Heart-2-Heart Hugs campaign, which provided warm winter clothes to Delaware's homeless children. Donations of sleeping bags, coats, hats, gloves, blankets, socks, scarves, snow pants, afghans, buntings, hoodies, and mittens were distributed to schools and foster care programs.

A series of videos were also created with Strauss's direction to help parents of children with disabilities, teachers, caseworkers, transition coordinators, and students.

Looking back, Mrs. Strauss reflects, "Knowing I and my dedicated staff made a difference in the lives of people with disabilities and their families have made my career so rewarding. Having met so many parents, advocates, and professionals that have taught me along the way was always a

blessing that I am thankful for.”

Stepping into the GACEC Executive Director position is Pamela Weir. Pam has served in the Department of Health and Social Services/Division of Public Health as the Assistant Part C Coordinator for the Birth to Three Early Intervention Program for six years. In that position, she provided oversight and support for the Part C of IDEA Interagency Coordination Council and representation on statewide committees and councils to ensure program initiatives. She has ten years of program management and implementation and over eighteen years of human services experience. Pam has extensive experience aligning processes with federal and state regulations and monitoring the effectiveness of programs. She has worked with individuals with disabilities for over eighteen years.

The purpose of the GACEC is to serve as a review board for policies, procedures, practices, and advocacy related to the delivery of services to people with disabilities from birth to death. They act in an advisory capacity for the Department of Education and the Department of Corrections.

For additional information, call 302-739-4553 or visit the website www.gacec.delaware.gov.