

Linda's Living Legacy

How One Mother's Devotion Grew Into a Statewide Organization

By Mary Jo Hebert

On a crowded bookshelf in my office sits a large black binder filled with the names and stories of Parent to Parent's earliest support parents, over 100 mothers and fathers who volunteer to share their experiences to help other families in need. Throughout the pages runs a common theme of families with brave kids being supported by still braver parents. Before the days of computers and databases, the binder served as a tool to organize parents around diagnoses and family dynamics. While every family's story is different, they all share one important point in common - every single one of them was told to and lovingly recorded by the first Director of Parent to Parent of NYS, Linda Rippel.



Linda understood firsthand a parent's need for support and encouragement while raising a child with special needs. After her daughter Rain was born with spina bifida, Linda became a tireless advocate on her daughter's behalf and devoted herself to helping Rain achieve a full and satisfying life. Out of her dedication to Rain grew a dedication to help others. Rain was the inspiration and motivation behind her mother's lifelong efforts to help other families to achieve their goals for their children. Linda brought a sincere message of caring to parents and freely shared her personal experience to encourage others facing similar challenges.

From her early days running a program sponsored by Easter Seals called Parent/Family Friend, Linda believed in the value of parent to parent support. As someone already familiar with the process of enlisting and training parents to become support parents, Linda was the obvious choice in 1995 to establish a Parent to Parent program through the statewide Family Support Council of the Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities (OMRDD). When Linda died of cancer in 1999, the disability community she helped build lost a tireless advocate and friend. Thanks to the early foundation she provided, Parent to Parent of NYS has grown into an organization that currently serves over 10,000 parents and professionals annually in nine regional offices across the state.

Linda's support of Rain and her goal to achieve a life of independence is a wonderful example of the power of a parent's belief in their child. Rain credits her mother as the driving force behind her ability to live independently in her own apartment. Using her mother as her example, Rain has grown into a powerful advocate for herself and others with disabilities. In addition to serving as President of the Self-Advocacy Association of NYS, Rain is a member of the Board of Directors of Parent to Parent of NYS. With Rain's appointment to the Parent to Parent Board, the important work begun by her mother so many years ago has come full circle.

A lot has changed within Parent to Parent since the days when a large black binder served as the organization's database. What remains the same, however, is the generosity and dedication of support parents who are willing to share their struggles and triumphs in order to help others. I think of the individual stories recorded by Linda like the squares of a quilt. Alone, they are nothing more than many and varied pieces of fabric. Together, they create something all together else.

In the earliest days of Parent to Parent, Linda Rippel gathered the families, threaded the needle and began to stitch together a network that today blankets New York from Long Island to Buffalo. While that network continues to grow and expand with the addition of every new support parent, Linda's vision for Parent to Parent remains the same - to provide support, comfort, and hope to all who come to it.

Mary Jo Hebert is the Regional Coordinator and Upstate Program Assistant for the Capital District office of Parent to Parent of NYS. ©2005 Parent to Parent of New York State. Permission is granted to copy and distribute this article as it is here without alteration. For more information, contact Janice Fitzgerald, Executive Director, Parent to Parent of New York State, PO Box 1296, Tupper Lake, NY 12986; (518) 359-3006.

Parent to Parent of New York State is a nonprofit organization with a mission to connect and support families of individuals with special needs. For more information, please visit our website at www.parenttoparentnys.org or call 1-800-305-8817.