

SPEDWatch founder receives national advocacy award

WASHINGTON, DC - On March 8th SPEDWatch Director Ellen Chambers traveled to Washington to accept the 2009 *Diane Lipton Award for Outstanding Educational Advocacy on Behalf of Children with Disabilities*. The award is given annually by the national Council of Parent Attorneys and Advocates (COPAA) to an individual or group of individuals who have made a particularly exceptional and outstanding contribution to COPAA's primary mission of obtaining high-quality educational services for children with disabilities. The award honors the memory of COPAA founding Board member and national disabilities attorney Diane J. Lipton, who was a tireless advocate for children with disabilities for over two decades.

A gathering of 400 attorneys, advocates and parents gave Chambers' acceptance speech a standing ovation.



Chambers addresses COPAA's Annual Conference

Text of Chambers' Diane Lipton Award Acceptance Speech

"Thank you. I cannot tell you how thrilled I am to receive this award. Not only because it recognizes my own work personally but more importantly because it validates the work that our organization, SPEDWatch, is doing.

"You know, I worked as an advocate in Massachusetts for 10 years before it finally struck me that the problems I was fixing for my clients in 1995 were the very same problems I was fixing ten years later in 2005. It didn't matter whether it was Down Syndrome, Autism, Bipolar Disorder, or Cerebral Palsy. It didn't matter whether it was 1995 or 2005. It didn't matter whether I was working in a wealthy school district, or in a very poor district. The exact same problems and obstacles were being thrown in front of parents and kids. Nothing had



Ellen Chambers and daughter Sarah in front of the White House (2009).

changed, nothing, in the ten years I'd been doing advocacy work.

"That is when I realized that I could go on doing individual case advocacy work and the only children I would have helped would be the kids whose parents could afford to hire me. And I couldn't have afforded to hire me!

"Then I started to think: In my state, Massachusetts, we have one of the strongest special education advocacy networks in the country. We have more parent side special ed attorneys than most (if not all) other states. We have more trained advocates. We have wonderful organizations offering all kinds of training for parents. And I asked myself: If we have such a strong advocacy network then why are we still facing the same problems and obstacles?

"Then I thought some more. And I realized that it's not because those attorneys, advocates, and training organizations aren't doing the right things, or aren't doing a good job. They're all doing fantastic work. Work that is absolutely necessary.

"But there is a critical variable missing from this advocacy equation ... and I would say it is the most important variable ... and that is the parents themselves.



"History has taught us that an oppressed population only wins lasting change when they themselves, the people directly affected by that oppression, organize in huge numbers and demand change with a unified voice.

"Look at the women's rights movement. Litigation, advocacy, legislation ... all those things were necessary to secure equal treatment for women in this country. But it wasn't until women themselves organized in massive numbers and

pressed their demands collectively, in the streets when necessary, that real change occurred.

"Look at the civil rights movement of the 40s, 50s and 60s. Again: litigation, advocacy, legislation were all critical in that movement. But it wasn't until African Americans organized themselves as a unified force to demand change that segregation finally start to crumble.

"I believe schoolchildren with disabilities, and their families, are an oppressed population in America. And I believe the only way out of our oppression is to organize ourselves, in massive numbers, and demand change with a unified voice.

"I formed SPEDWatch to provide an infrastructure and leadership for a massive, civil rights, social change movement – using the same techniques that were successful in those earlier struggles – but this time aimed at securing the educational rights of all schoolchildren with special needs.

"We only operate in Massachusetts today, but we absolutely intend to take this movement nationwide. We've only been operating for three years. And in that time, with very few resources, we've proven that when parents organize and speak out collectively ... change happens.

"In one district about 30 parents came together and, with SPEDWatch guiding them, were successful in ousting a very toxic special education director. In another district we helped just a handful of parents present their demands in such a strong fashion that the school board (who by the way was famous for utterly ignoring their special education population) has now formed a number of subcommittees to explore how they can improve their programming and compliance with the law. And a parent sits on every one of those committees.

"We pressured one of our major TV stations to do a story on parents' experiences in the Massachusetts special education system. First time such a story has ever been done. We persuaded a four color glossy Cape Cod magazine to devote an entire issue to the experiences of Cape Cod parents in the system. When our ABC affiliate news station wanted on-camera comment about Sarah Palin's potential as an advocate for parents, they came to SPEDWatch. And I and my daughter Sarah looked right into that camera and we told it like it is.

"When I return home from this conference I have plans to meet with parents in 2 more districts who are fed up and want to know how they can effect change

in their districts. SPEDWatch will help them. We like to say that SPEDWatch strikes the match, but it's up to local parents to keep the flame of change burning. And parents are proving that they will do that because they have an organization to provide them with support and encouragement.

"Well, obviously I could talk for hours about SPEDWatch but I was told I only have 8 minutes so I'll finish up now.

"Two things before I do.

"First of all, creating an organization like SPEDWatch doesn't happen in a vacuum. It requires an awful lot of hard work, time and sacrifice. There would not be a SPEDWatch today, I would not be standing up here, if it weren't for the tremendous sacrifices made by two people who are here with me today: my husband Mark and our daughter Sarah.

"Mark needs a new car and a new garage to put it in and, you know what? - he deserves that. Sarah needs a new bedroom, and you know what? - she deserves that. They both need more of my time, and you know what? - they deserve that. But they have sacrificed all those things so that SPEDWatch could take root and grow.

"Finally, it is incredibly humbling to be given an award that honors the memory of a woman of Diane Lipton's stature. I was not fortunate enough to know Diane. But I have learned from talking to people who did, what a remarkable woman she was, and how deeply her loss is felt here today. So I want to promise all of you, but especially I want to promise those of you who knew Diane and worked alongside her, that I will do everything I can continue my work in a way that will honor her memory."



COPAA Board Chair Alice Nelson, Ellen Chambers, and COPAA Board member Jessica Butler.