

## **Surviving Above the Timberline—My 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Tribute to Partners in Policymaking**

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A.G. Gaston once described the region above the timberline as follows: Just below the Continental Divide in Colorado's Rocky Mountains at altitudes of 11,500 feet above sea level, few trees can survive. This altitude, referred to as the alpine zone, is considered to be the region above the timberline. Alpine plants that survive in this zone have dwarfed trunks that grow low to the ground.

In the alpine zone, extreme environmental conditions create a unique climate that in turn creates many other clearly perceptible changes in plant and animal life. Fierce drying winds tear at the turf blasting plants and animals with sand and ice. During the winter months (which lasts from September to July), smaller animals hibernate. Larger ones move to lower elevations. Plants, on the other hand, that cannot move out of harm's way, grow hardy in this high, cold, windy place.

What does all of this have to do with the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Partners in Policymaking? Like the harsh climate above the timberline, I too have encountered harsh environmental conditions in my own, personal journey advocating for my 14 year old daughter with Down Syndrome. Even in the face of modern-day laws enacted to protect and advance the rights of individuals with *disABILITIES*, I find that it often remains a struggle to raise our children to become good neighbors, responsible citizens, and productive workers in the communities where we live.

Because of Partners in Policymaking, however, I learned, when Lizzy was still very young, to adapt to the harsh environmental conditions and learned how to help my Lizzy grow smarter and stronger in her regular classroom among her typically-developing peers.

Because of the forward-thinking, cutting-edge nature of the training I received at Partners—where I learned not just what is, but what can be—I formed a non-profit entity, Advocacy Institute, Inc., where individuals with *disABILITIES* in my community will not be left to experience painful frustration in a stubborn battle to eke out a mere existence where there is no choice, no inclusion, no quality of life. I've since taught others how to form non-profits too. And now, Advocacy Institute, Inc. is the contractor to the North Carolina Council on Developmental Disabilities that delivers the Partners in Policymaking project in North Carolina.

Because of the exposure I gained in Partners to visionaries like Colleen Wieck, the many national presenters, foremost amongst whom is *my* teacher, Kathie Snow, and my awesome Program Coordinator, Laura Buckner, I was exposed to best practices in leadership and advocacy. I acquired knowledge for system change, not just for the sake of knowledge.

Just as the alpine plants and animals that cannot escape the fury of the elements adjust to the climate and grow stronger and hardier, we, as Partner graduates have too with the kind and gentle guidance of the many, outstanding, Program Coordinators, past and present, like, *Laura Buckner—TX, Joyce Steel—NY, Jayne R. Chase—AL, Liz Gary—LA*, and so many others in the many states and countries where replication model training is delivered. Opportunities to adapt and remain strong and hardy abound, not just for us, as graduates, but for our families and communities too.

To the Partners in Policymaking program founders, Colleen Wieck and Ed Skarnulis, there are no words to fully express my gratitude for your vision, wisdom, and commitment, so I leave you with Linda Ori's inspiring words:

Above the Timberline

Oh, let my spirit wander  
Where the air is crisp and clear  
And the whispers of the wilderness  
Are the only sounds I hear;

Oh, let me venture yonder  
Where the earth is pure and clean  
Where mankind and pollution  
Are seldom ever seen;

Let me test my soul's endurance  
In this unforgiving place -  
Let man and beast in battle  
Meet each other face to face;

For passion is the hunter  
And wisdom is the prey  
And if I am victorious  
Let my legend ever stay

Away above the timberline  
In that stronghold of the gods,  
Where I dared to face the challenge  
And excelled against the odds!

Because of Partners in Policymaking, we, as graduates, have for 25 years dared to face the challenge and continue to excel against the odds. May the legacy of Partners in Policymaking, as seen in communities all across this country and abroad, forever stay.