

EP'S EXCEPTIONAL EDUCATORS 2013

EP (Exceptional Parent) Magazine is reintroducing its Exceptional Educators honors following a few gap years. This time around, aside from reaching out to EP's network of friends and partners in the special needs community, we also turned to Facebook and Twitter to request parents, caregivers, colleagues, as well as other education professionals, to send in their nominations for outstanding educators in the field.

This year's honorees are being celebrated in EP's Annual Education Issue for performing work that is over and above their typical daily duties and responsibilities. So much so that someone they knew took the time to tell the

world about their extraordinary dedication, creativeness and caring. It is not easy being a teacher tasked with helping to mold the minds and future characters of children. Being a teacher for children with special needs often asks for even more out of these educators. As one of our honorees expressed, "As a special educator it is my job to teach these children the skills and tools that will enhance the quality of their lives." And, said another, "I want their parents to know their children are in good hands."

And so, ladies and gentlemen, let us celebrate the good and wonderful work of EP's 2013 Exceptional Educators:

AMY SANSONE

Department of Exceptional Learners
Crown Point High School, Crown Point, IN

Amy Sansone says: "As a special education teacher, I know that no kid wants to feel different. Everyone wants to be included and respected. It's my belief that I not only need to teach, but also cheerlead them to believe they are worthy of accomplishing their goals. As teachers we need to help our students find their passion, the fire burning in their belly. We need to give them opportunities to succeed and remind them of their successes, so that they know they can do it again. The bottom line is I do what I do because I love to work with kids."

"Mrs. Sansone is so warm and made freshman year so much better for my son. He felt comfortable with her right away. He also has a hard time making friends, but she helped him through so many issues and helped to boost his self-esteem. She just made him feel so "normal". She helps some students deal with emotional issues and had her hands full with my son. She was his 'magic person' and calmed him down. She works well with so many issues. I don't think I have the best words to explain her, she is just the best teacher my son has ever had!"

– Submitted by: Ann Pence, mother of a student in Amy Sansone's class.





CYNTHIA MCCREARY, M.S. ED.

Special Education Teacher
South Anna Elementary School, Hanover, VA

Cynthia McCreary says: *"My philosophy in educating children with special needs is that one must listen with their heart. Each child will teach you how they learn best. You must be keenly aware of individual characteristics of the child, not the disability. Students with special needs will guide your instructional strategies. Every aspect of their character, personality and learning style will speak volumes, even if they never utter a word."*

"Ms. McCreary strongly demonstrates teaching excellence with students with intellectual disability, significantly involves parents and others from the community in the educational process, individualizes the curriculum to meet student needs, and utilizes innovative methods in addressing student needs. She is a leader in the TEACCH methodology administered in the classroom and serves as a mentor to other SPED teachers on the methodology. She approaches education in a holistic sense by addressing all senses of her students. She even instituted a sensory area in the classroom... She encourages open communication and frequent status updates by providing daily progress notes on the general progress of the day, intermittent emails/texts of significant events accompanied by pictures, weekly raw data of the status of the student's IEP goals, email each Sunday evening to all parents with the schedule for the week, and data in graph format for interim and report cards. She is involved with her students in both the classroom as well as in their home environment (e.g., regularly attends students' birthday party, even on weekends, to help with transitions)." – Submitted by: Allison Thurman, mother of Alex Thurman, student in Ms. McCreary's class

THOMAS MACCHIAVERNA

Special Education Teacher
Woodrow Wilson Middle School, Edison NJ

Thomas Macchiaverna says: *"Educating students with special needs has made life fun. My job allows me to use my creativity to make a difference in the lives of people who really need it. There has never been a dull moment and I don't expect that to change. Helping students with special needs as they progress into functional young adults gives me a great reason to go to work every day. It is incredibly gratifying and humbling."*

"Mr. Macchiaverna has made a special impact on my son Eddie Lin's life. The parents/teachers and the administrators in Edison all recognize that as well. He was the teacher of the year in Edison district 2013... Since I work in the healthcare field, I always like to think of Mr. Machiaverna as a great diagnostician in the teaching profession. He teaches based on a student's unique special needs. He knows which method or



approach will work best with that individual pupil. Under Mr. Macchiaverna's teaching, my son was able to transition to the district's LLD High school program with minimum transition time. We have him to thank for that."

– Submitted by: Jenny Lin, mother of Eddie Lin, student in Mr. Macchiaverna's class.



ELYSE CYR

Instructor/Academic Advisor
Shepherds College, Union Grove, WI

Elyse Cyr says: *"The students I work with have incredible potential to lead full and purposeful lives. They each have tremendous gifts and strengths to be used to enrich their community, interests and values to shape their future, and abilities to grow and learn in spite of obstacles. It is an honor and a joy to instill in them a lasting awareness of God's purpose for their lives and prepare them for great things."*

"Aristotle once said, 'For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them.' He would have heartily approved of Mrs. Cyr and her engaging, interactive methods of teaching young adults with intellectual disabilities. Through hands-on, creative activities, like teaching a class in the school's basement to gain an understanding of the underground church, or setting up story stations complete with props, costumes and actors, Mrs. Cyr is able to communicate difficult, faith-based concepts in a way that inspires a passion for learning and a desire to keep learning in the hearts and minds of every student. Her students listen intently, participate, discover, remember, and talk about her class, years after they graduate." – Submitted by: Susan Griffis, co-worker and admirer of Mrs. Cyr, on behalf of the school's Executive Director, the Dean of Education.



EDWARD CONTALDI

Special Education Teacher
HMS School for Children with Cerebral Palsy,
Philadelphia, PA

Edward Contaldi says: *"It is my great privilege to have worked work with my students over the years. We worked hard to deepen our communication through interaction, language and music, and we had a lot of fun doing it! Their hard work has been a great example to me and I look forward to many more years of learning from my students."*

"Edward Contaldi has been a teacher of special education for over 24 years. He is also a certified music therapist who often uses music as a motivating tool for interaction with his students. His current focus is using the Greenspan Floortime approach with developmentally young students. Ed is a natural teacher of all; therapists, interns, teacher assistants, parents and administrators have expanded their perspectives after working with Ed. His warm and patient style of interacting and providing repetitive practice for students contributes to his effectiveness. His class is active and joyful and he is an asset to our program." – Submitted by: Christina Coia, Director of Education, Edward's supervisor.

**MELANIE ROSE-ZAGWYN**

Art Director
New England Village, Pembroke, MA

Melanie Zagwyn says: *"Within each person lies a glimmer of greatness and through the freedom to explore the creative self, each artist's method of expression becomes his or her own distinctive signature. Encouraging these 'signatures' by dedicating time and space to the Arts is something I look forward to accomplishing every day. It is inspiring both personally and professionally, to realize that the collaborative journey becomes the exhilarating outcome!"*

"Melanie Rose-Zagwyn has a BFA degree and Art Education Teaching Certificate from the Massachusetts College of Art and has served as New England Village's Art Director for the past 14 years. As an instructor and developer of programming for adults with developmen-



tal disabilities, she has worked tirelessly and passionately to make art accessible for individuals of all abilities and to raise awareness of inclusive practices. Under her tutelage, many New England Village program participants have had their artwork displayed in museums, libraries, businesses and local schools in Boston and its surrounding communities. Her unique and effective style of teaching has led to the development of a best practices format of instruction, which is currently being utilized as a training tool in our organization and at other agencies within the human services field." – Submitted by: Lisa Drennan, supervisor to Melanie.

**JENNIFER DAUGHERTY**

Special Education Teacher
Heartspring, Wichita, KS

Cynthia McCreary says: *"I have been blessed with the opportunity over the last five years to educate children living with a disability at Heartspring. As educators, it is our primary goal to assist students in attaining their highest level of academic achievement in the least restrictive environment. Through the use of research and evidence-based practices in daily academic programming, we have been able to ensure that students receive the highest quality of education in order to reach their academic potential. We also have developed an essential network of community resources in Wichita. It truly takes a dedicated learning community to ensure that our students reach their greatest potential. To have been selected as one of EP's Exceptional Educators of the Year is a direct reflection of all that I've had the opportunity to be a part of — and, of course, the children's perseverance and bravery to overcome individual challenges."*

"Jennifer has quietly become a leader in our school, with her nothing's impossible attitude and unwavering commitment to the students in her classroom. Her rapport with the parents of the children we serve has formed lasting bonds with families of the students here, past and present. Parents talk about their trust in Jennifer, to get the most out of their child's ability, and trust that whatever she does on their behalf will be meticulously thought out. She is the voice for students when they need one, as well as an extremely powerful advocate. She has worked very hard to develop a relationship with the local school district that Heartspring sits in. Because of her efforts, the school has three students that leave campus to attend a local high school for some of their classes, setting them up for a less difficult transition when returning to their home school district. She helps achieve the student's greatest potential. Jennifer is so much more than just a teacher." – Submitted by: Stephen Perry, Heartspring Director of Education Services



ASHLEY RAPOSO, JENNIFER DECOSTA, TALA MCNEILLY, ERIN MINGOLA, BRITTANY MICHAUD AND JESSICA RAWNSLEY

Special Education Teachers
Crystal Springs School, Assonet, MA



Tala McNeilly says: *“Educating students with special needs is a privilege and a blessing. On a daily basis, I am reminded how important it is to celebrate all accomplishments in life. What may seem so small and insignificant to one person can be such a huge accomplishment for another and I am honored to assist students with reaching their full potential. The best parts, however, are the lessons of acceptance, love, and perseverance that I have learned from the students.”*

Jennifer DeCosta says: *“Through my work with children with severe special needs I am able to help children develop skills necessary for successful participation in daily life. Tasks that many people take for granted such as communicating basic wants and needs are a daily challenge for most of my students. However, there is no greater reward as a teacher than to be a witness to a student’s progress, especially in something as essential as communication or daily living skills.”*

Brittany Michaud says: *“I enjoy my position because the job presents a challenge each day. I wake up every morning not sure what the day’s challenge will be, but the challenge is something that makes this position enjoyable. I enjoy the hands-on teaching and interactions with the students. Nothing*

can compare to the feeling of putting so much time and effort into each and every student, which is not always easy, but is well worth it when you have the opportunity to see that student succeed.”

Erin Mingola says: *“I absolutely love my job! Every day I try to teach them new things, and often, at the end of the day, I realize that they have in fact taught me something new. Whether it’s a way to help me teach them more effectively or revealing a new side of their personalities to our staff... Every day, I arrive at work with a smile and look forward to a new day with my students and aides, who are absolutely fantastic too. We make a great TEAM!”*

Ashley Raposo says: *“Teaching students with severe disabilities is a privilege. My students challenge me as much as I challenge them each day. Their perseverance and determination push me to be the best teacher that I can be each and every day.”*

Jessica Rawnsley says: *“Working with children who have exceptional disabilities is a truly rewarding experience. I am very fortunate that I’m able to be a part of my students’ lives. Being in the education field has been wonderful for me.”*



FRONT TO BACK
Ashley Raposo,
Jennifer DeCosta,
Tala McNeilly,
Erin Mingola and
Brittany Michaud
(not pictured:
Jennifer Rawnsley).

“Great teachers are priceless. They are patient and kind, inspiring, interesting and charismatic all at the same time. They are also very rare... The six remarkable young women who teach our students are, without question, amongst the ranks of the great in our profession. Each and every day, they rise to the challenge of personally connecting with children living with severe to profound physical and cognitive disabilities, in addition to also having complex medical needs and behavioral challenges. Due to the fact that there is currently no suitable published curriculum available for teaching our students, these incredible teachers consistently meet the challenge of not only developing their own, but also having it approved by state education authorities. As anyone who has ever taught knows, this requires not only an exceptional level of dedication, but also tremendous innovation! They also work with our students in developing and strengthening daily life-skills...Put simply, it is largely due to the hearts and souls of these six teachers that Crystal Springs School is the place where students develop ‘New Abilities for a Better Tomorrow.’ And we thank them.” – Submitted by: Alda Binsaid, Director of Education at the school.

DENISE STOUTAMYER

Special Education Teacher
The Elizabeth Lee Black School the Barber National
Institute, Erie, PA

Denise Stoutamyer says: *"It takes a village' is especially true when speaking about my experience with preschool special needs children. I have been fortunate to have a great team (especially my classroom staff) to support me and help me to enable the children to maximize their potential and care for them in a way they deserve. It is exhilarating to see the children demonstrate new skills and abilities each day. I want their parents to know their children are in good hands."*

"In the five years that she has been with our school, Denise Stoutamyer has distinguished herself by her unwavering commitment to students ages three to five in an Early Intervention Specialized Preschool Class. This year, Denise will be responsible for a total of 50 students who attend class on various days every week. In spite of the large number of students she works with, each youngster will receive the kind of individualized attention that makes it seem as though they are the only student in her class. Denise is able to recognize the needs, desires and skills of each of her students. She creates a safe and stimulating environment conducive to being curious and learning. She has a positive approach to resolving behavioral challenges, is dynamic, creative, and a consummate professional. When Denise is not in the classroom you're sure to find her with her students on some adventure, such as a scavenger hunt through the school or a search for dinosaurs. Denise exhibits great leadership and dedication to all whose lives she has touched." – Submitted by: Ms. Nina Wolfarth, Early Care Coordinator at the school.

**TAMMY WILLIAMS**

Day Program as the Dining Room Hostess/
Telecom Room Instructor
Martha Lloyd, Troy, PA



Tammy Williams says: *"I have enjoyed the years that I have worked with people with special needs. During that time, I have worked hard to understand and provide each one I work with, with the skills and support that they needed. Compassion and caring are needed by anyone who works with people who have special needs. Those that have come into my life over the years have only made me a better person having worked with and known them."*

"Tammy Williams was hired in 1997 as a residential substitute. In late 1997, she was hired fulltime in the Day Program. Through the years, she has worked as the receptionist, with the Business Office, been a part of the vocational work center and, eventually, was hired fulltime as the Dining Room Hostess/Telecom Room Instructor. Tammy is certified as a Medication Administration Trainer. She has served on various committees over the years, including the Health and Safety Committee and the Team Appreciation Committee. She has developed good relationships with both individuals and staff... She is a good organizer, always looking for ways to improve procedures. She is very creative in her approach to instructing and adapting lessons to each individual. Tammy works hard to create programs and activities for her area. She always goes the extra mile to provide the individuals with activities to enrich their lives." – Submitted by: Beth Root, Day Program Supervisor.

**MARGARET ZAPPULLA**

Special Education Teacher
The Matheny School, Peapack, NJ



Margaret Zappulla says: *"Working with students with special needs is a fulfilling experience. My belief is that if you have a goal in life, nothing should stop you from achieving it. I teach my students that if there is something in life that you want to do, whether it is learning to read, learning a job skill, or even just going shopping, nothing should stop you. No matter what it is you want to do, you have to try. You will not do it exactly the same way as others, but you have to try. The students I work with work hard and they never give up, I will not let them. I have a responsibility to provide them with the encouragement, tools, and support to help them reach their goals."*

"Margaret Zappulla always aspires to reach new heights. Although she concentrates on her lesson plans, curriculum maps and individual student needs, she is not your typical teacher. She goes above and beyond – not just for her students but in order to add to the professional growth of others through presentations at Matheny, and at external venues. Some of her biggest contributions have been on Matheny's technology committee where she has worked to get technology plans approved by the state and rolled out special initiatives such as providing assistive switches to every student in the school." – Submitted by: Sean Murphy, The Matheny School Principal.

CHRISTINA (CHRIS) GROSS, PT, MS

Physical Therapist

The Elizabeth Lee Black School the Barber National Institute, Erie, PA

Christina Gross says: *"I am privileged to be a part of a team that is skilled at providing the children at the Elizabeth Lee Black School with the tools and adaptations they need to maximize their potential to learn. The recent advances in technology and adaptive equipment have opened up many new avenues to assist the children with reaching their goals. It is sometimes challenging to find the "right" tool to meet each child's unique learning need, but I cannot express the satisfaction of seeing them succeed."*



"A faculty member since 2007, Ms. Christina (Chris) Gross works with students ages three to 21 who have a wide variety of physical and intellectual challenges. Chris is always the consummate professional, utilizing her full range of skills and experience to address the individual needs of each student. Chris partners with students, teachers and parents to set realistic goals and provide education at each step of treatment to ensure that youngsters achieve the maximum benefit. Her commitment to inclusion has led her to develop several innovative opportunities for our students. Through her initiative, our school developed an adapted bicycling program that enables students with all disabilities to ride a bike for recreation and exercise. To help our faculty and educators in other schools implement this program, she wrote and produced an instructional interactive iBook. Chris has actively pursued grants that have enabled us to develop a state-of-the-art fitness facility that includes adaptive exercise equipment as well as purchase gait trainers and specialized equipment and seating to help students achieve their greatest potential for independence. . .I have had the opportunity to observe therapists throughout my career of more than 30 years and Chris has surpassed all levels of dedication due to her expertise, positive attitude, vision and compassion for students. – Submitted by: Dr. Maureen Barber-Carey, Executive VP of the Barber National Institute.

KERRIGAN (KERRI) DOUGHERTY, M. ED.

Special Education Teacher

The Melmark School, Berwyn, PA

Kerrigan Dougherty says: *"I consider myself to be a very fortunate individual, because I have the privilege of sharing the majority of my days with the most unique students I have ever encountered. As a special educator it is my job to teach these children the skills and tools that will enhance the quality of their lives. However the truth is they have touched my life and taught me more about life than I could ever have imagined teaching them. Working with these exceptional students has taught me patience, humility and perseverance. It has shown me kindness, appreciation, and love. It is my belief that all children have the ability to learn and when we educators open up our minds and hearts, all children have the gift to teach us valuable lessons as well."*



"Kerri has been at The Melmark School since December 2006. She is an incredible teacher who is always friendly, helpful and the biggest advocate for her students. She has worked to provide many students with a way to communicate, that they never had before. She has helped teach students skills that have begun and expanded their ability to interact with others. Parents rave about her! Kerri always puts the students care and progress above all else. She consistently has independence and increased quality of life as her main goals when teaching her students. All of the goals chosen for her students incorporate functional skills needed for independence and success through their adulthood. She does an excellent job at seeing the 'big picture' when it comes to her students' personal welfare. She does an excellent job ensuring continuity of care for the individuals she serves... In addition, many teachers who have been under Kerri's supervision have continued to progress in their professional development with the guidance of Kerri as a mentor. She continually makes herself available as a resource to other teachers and professionals that she does not directly oversee within the school." – Submitted by: Jennifer Rodgers, M.S., NCSP, BCBA, Director of Educational Services at the school.

ELAINE PHILLIPS

Teacher

Perkins School for the Blind, Secondary (High School) Program, Watertown, MA

Elaine Phillips says: *"The reason I started teaching, was that in college I met friends who were blind and I was so impressed with them as people that I wanted to be a part of educating students who were blind and visually impaired to help them achieve independence commensurate with their capabilities. After almost 40 years in public school and at Perkins School for the Blind, the goal of teaching students to be as independent as possible is still just as important to me. Recently I did extra work with two students to help them prepare a portfolio of their work to fulfill the requirements for state mandated testing in math, and they were able to receive high school diplomas, another key to independence."*



"Teachers who come to Perkins School for the Blind are often 'Miracle Workers' giving their students what they need to optimize their abilities and truly do all that is possible. Elaine Phillips is one such teacher — a veteran with nearly 40 years of teaching experience, she has touched the lives of many students. She has taught in the Perkins Secondary Program full-time since 2009. While her efforts always have a positive impact, last year was special for two girls who Elaine worked closely with in developing their MCAS portfolios. Elaine worked tirelessly to support these young women, including in off hours and before her regular classes began each morning, and eventually DESE determined that they had passed. Because of Elaine's belief in them, the students' efforts paid off and they received their high school diplomas... Elaine is an amazing teacher who works with students with a variety of visual, behavioral, physical and intellectual abilities. She teaches high school level math, computers, assistive technology, Braille, MCAS preparation and mobility in her current position." — Submitted by: Carolyn Assa, Executive Director of Communications at the school.

BARBARA LITRASpecial Education Teacher
Anderson Center for Autism,
Staatsburg, NY

Barbara Litra says: *"The students at the Anderson Center for Autism are an absolute joy to work with, for each one has a unique personality and is in their own way an amazing individual. They are excited about learning and proud of their accomplishments. This is why I put a lot of time and effort into my work, for the rewards far exceed anything that I have given. Teaching students with autism is more than just a job or a profession. I love to come to work for each day brings new experiences and opportunities for me to learn, as well as to teach."*

"Barbara has been a Special Education Teacher at Anderson Center for Autism (ACA) for over 13 years. ACA serves students ages 5 to 21 who are on the autism spectrum and present with significant behavioral, communication and academic challenges. Barbara effectively utilizes behavior analytic teaching methods to teach all academic areas as well as social, communication and coping skills. She has faith in her students' abilities and assists them as they achieve goals both large and small. If I had a child with autism, I would be thrilled to have that child in Barbara Litra's classroom." — Submitted by: Kathleen Marshall, Director of Children's Services, Anderson Center for Autism.

**NANCY PICCOLA**Teacher and Certified Special Educator
Henry Viscardi School at The Viscardi Center,
Albertson, NY

Nancy Piccola says: *"As a special education teacher, I believe that all students must be challenged to do their best, and be provided with the academic and emotional support to succeed both in and out of school. I believe every student should be valued and acknowledged for their unique abilities and achievements. Although teaching students with special needs can be challenging, there is no greater gift than hearing from my students years after graduation that they are leading happy, productive and successful lives."*



"A middle/high school business teacher and certified special educator, Nancy Piccola and has an extremely positive relationship with the students, families and staff of the Henry Viscardi School. She has an extraordinary ability to differentiate instruction so that all of our students can actively participate in class. Although nurturing, she sets high expectations for each of her students and is such a positive role model and mentor that they maintain contact with her, long after graduation to seek her advice and guidance. As the yearbook coordinator, she works with the student committee to meet production deadlines and wholeheartedly supports their creativity. Given her subject matter, she continually updates her computer skills so that her instruction is relevant to today's world. She truly sees the potential in everyone and would be the last person to be expected to be recognized for her work." — Submitted by: Patrice M. Kuntzler, VP of Program Development at Henry Viscardi School.