

fAmILy



MEET DIANA GUZMAN

Parent Advocate of the Month

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WHAT MADE YOU ADVOCATE FOR YOUR CHILD'S EDUCATION?

The moment I realized how easily Austin's needs could be misunderstood was the moment I knew I had to be his voice. As a nonverbal child with autism, his "yes" or "no" is not always a true answer. Sometimes it is just a hope that you already understand what he means. That small detail could easily be missed in a busy classroom, but it changes everything about how he learns. I did not want him to be treated like a number on a caseload. I wanted him to be seen, understood, and given the tools to grow. My decision to advocate was not just about getting him services. It was about protecting his dignity and ensuring that his unique way of engaging with the world was valued.

WHAT IS THE BEST WAY TO EDUCATE YOURSELF ABOUT SPECIAL EDUCATION AND RELATED SERVICES?

It means showing up every time prepared, focused, and ready to speak on his behalf even on the days I feel tired, discouraged, or unheard. It means holding the system accountable, not accepting "good enough," and making sure decisions are not made for convenience but for what is truly best for Austin. I have learned to read between the lines, to trust my instincts as his mother, and to never let his quiet voice be mistaken for a lack of needs. Being his best advocate means fighting for his education while also protecting his joy, his comfort, and his right to be exactly who he is.



WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE OTHER FAMILIES ADVOCATING FOR THEIR CHILD'S RIGHTS IN SPECIAL EDUCATION?

Document everything such as dates, conversations, and emails because your memory will be tested. Learn your rights and your child's rights, and do not be afraid to bring up the law when necessary. Understand that you are not asking for extra. You are asking for the basic tools your child needs to have the same opportunity as every other student. Surround yourself with people who understand this journey because it is not one you should walk alone. And remember, you know your child best. Trust that voice even when others try to make you doubt it.

WHAT DOES BEING YOUR CHILD'S BEST ADVOCATE MEAN TO YOU?

Start with trusted resources like The Arc of New Jersey and your state's special education department. Attend every training, webinar, or parent meeting you can. Even if you think you already know the topic, you might hear one thing that changes your approach. Read every page of your child's IEP and evaluations as if their future depends on it because it does. When something does not make sense, ask questions until it does. The more you understand, the harder it is for anyone to dismiss your child's needs.

