

Once upon a time...
The story of the Statewide Parent Advocacy Network

The year was 1987: The #1 song was George Michael's *Ya Gotta Have Faith*. For three women sitting at a kitchen table, that faith included the expectation that a federal grant proposal they submitted would be successful. Diana Cuthbertson, Pam Crane, and Lisa Meehan's vision for New Jersey families included having a center where parents could call and have their questions answered by parents who had first-hand experience raising a child with a disability. It included creating resources and workshops to teach families how to partner with schools to educate their children appropriately. Their faith paid off, and that fall New Jersey's official parent training and information center, the Statewide Parent Advocacy Network, was funded. Did I mention that the album of the year was Jon Bon Jovi's *Livin on a Prayer*? Now the real work had just begun.

Westfield was SPAN's first home, and Diana Cuthbertson was SPAN's founding executive director. Official business began in the spring of 1988 with two phone lines and 4 part-time staff. Within 2 months the phones were ringing off the hook. Families became civil rights activists insisting that the doors be open to their children in neighborhood schools. Diana realized that for parents who did not speak English the battle to receive appropriate services was even greater, so SPAN subcontracted with the Club de Padres, a Multilingual Family Center in Paterson to establish a linkage for Latino families.

Other collaborations followed. The Boggs Center, Special Child Health Services, New Jersey Education Association, and the State Department office of Special Education are just a few of the many partnerships that SPAN has enjoyed over the years. In 1993 SPAN's first annual conference, *Sharing Good Ideas*, was held.

In 1995 SPAN welcomed Diana Autin as its new executive director, and under her leadership the organization moved to its current location in Newark. She successfully brought in major grant funding that exponentiated SPAN's capacity to provide support throughout New Jersey. She hired staff that represent the myriad of diversity within our state, and she expanded SPAN's vision to include support to families experiencing frustrations in both general and special education as well as health, mental health, child welfare, juvenile justice, and all the systems that impact children and families. She insisted that New Jersey follow the laws ensuring appropriate education for all its children.

SPAN continues to grow; today we have two executive co-directors. Diana Autin and Debra Jennings have divided the leadership role to ensure the proper support to all of our endeavors. We are located all over the state, and are recognized nationally for our expertise in education, health and mental health, cultural competence, and parent engagement and leadership. Our trainings range from two hours to 12 sessions with topics customized as necessary. SPAN is recognized on a myriad of national, state and local task forces. We serve as the technical assistance center for all the Parent Information Centers in Region I, and our website enjoys thousands of hits per month. A highlight of our SPAN conference is the Diana Cuthbertson Parent Professional collaboration award given in recognition to individuals who exemplify the spirit of partnering that was Diana Cuthbertson's vision.

SPAN staff come and go; some are very new, while others seem to be here forever. SPAN used to be one gender, and even that has changed. What has not changed is the dedication, passion, and enthusiasm shared by SPAN staff to hold accountable the "experts" in the health, education, and well being of families in New Jersey, and for that we are all grateful.