

Earl Walden Award for Outstanding Rural Advocate – 2008

Post Las Vegas Conference Newsletter article

Lisa Erquiaga Interview -

Lisa came to this year's APRIL Conference all "jazzed" about her son Owen being nominated for a seat on the Board of Directors. All she could think about was how proud she was to see her 20 year old having a chance to sit on the APRIL board. She knew his experience with the youth at APRIL in San Antonio was the catalyst for his decision to step up and become an advocate. "It all seemed to fall into place for him there. I couldn't believe my quiet, somewhat retiring son was proclaiming to a crowd of 300 people how he felt about IL. It was wonderful to see."

She had no idea what was in store for her and the secret plans that were being spun between her staff, her family and APRIL. She was soon to become the recipient of the 2008 Earl Walden Award for Outstanding Rural Advocacy. Her husband, Carl, even showed up unannounced to be with her when she received the award.

"What a shock!" says Lisa who's only missed a handful of APRIL Conferences and seen many other proud recipients of the award. "I was totally surprised, overwhelmed and humbled." Even in this interview it was difficult to get Lisa to talk about herself and her own accomplishments. She's a self proclaimed "behind the scenes" kind of gal.

When asked about her most memorable advocacy moment, Lisa recounted a "learning experience," a time when she was trying to help an older gentleman (Joe) out of a nursing home and into an apartment of his own. All the odds were against it and family, doctors and everyone else kept telling him it was impossible. Lisa wouldn't give up, because Joe wanted it so badly. All the plans were made, the apartment rented and everything was in place for the move. He got out and was overjoyed, but the joy was short-lived. After only 5 days of freedom, Joe realized it just wasn't going to work for him and he went back.

At first, Lisa felt like they'd failed, but Joe reassured her there was no failure here. She was the only one who stuck by him; let him take the chance to follow his dream. He alone had made the decision to return, but he'd owned the risk. No one else was willing to help him do that. On Joe's return, he became Lisa's biggest advocate – he had a purpose and a new job. He knew there was a way for folks to get out of that nursing home if they wanted to and he knew just the person to help them do it!

Lisa Erquiaga has lived IL from her roots in the patience and perseverance of her Granny Brown, who "got" IL before there was even a name for it, to having a child with a disability, to nursing home move-outs and beyond. Lisa's motto is, "just because the world says no, doesn't mean you can't try it." She's proven "the world" wrong before and will probably continue for a long time.

OUR SINCERE CONGRATULATIONS to you Lisa.

More about Lisa –

Lisa Erquiaga is the Executive Director of the Northern Nevada Center for Independent Living (NNCIL) in Sparks, Nevada and its two rural satellite offices in Fallon and Elko. Lisa works in Sparks, but a big part of her heart and soul is all about Rural. She commutes almost two hours every day from Fallon, where she and Carl, her husband of 28 years, and her youngest of three children, Owen, live and work on a picturesque farm at the edge of town. Lisa and Carl were blessed with baby Owen in 1988. He was born with spina bifida and hydrocephalus, so Lisa and her family were faced with little information and almost no services in their small rural town. She set out on a life-long mission to gather information and raise a child with a disability and at the same time, to ensure that her son and other children with disabilities would have all the services and advantages that every child deserves.

Lisa was no stranger to disabilities. As a child she was close to her uncle who had MS and used a wheelchair. She observed her "Granny Brown" in action when caring for him and in doing so learned what it meant to be an "advocate" for a person with a disability. In a world where no one on the outside seemed to care, Granny Brown's positive, can-do attitude shines through as Lisa raises her son and lives her life. Lisa's husband Carl said, "Lisa's early experiences with her uncle and Granny are what prepared her for having Owen and she believes she is doing what she was meant to do." Lisa is a wonderful example to her staff, business associates, family and friends as she interacts with all people with the same warm, kind and loving nature that is unique to her.

NNCIL found Lisa in 1994, when she was hired as the office manager in Fallon. Two short years later she became the Rural Director and IL Advocate, positions she held until early 2008. In July 2002, Lisa added the Co-Executive Director's position in Sparks to her plate, then became Acting Executive Director in December that same year. Ultimately, Lisa earned the position of Executive Director in August 2004 and still holds that position today. During her tenure at NNCIL, she has implemented new reporting methods to enhance reporting procedures and grant writing and has reduced duplication of efforts in her Center, making better use of staff time.

While Lisa was an advocate in Fallon, she did many things to raise awareness of the issues faced by people with disabilities. She oversaw the planning, coordination and procurement of over \$45,000 for an accessible playground in the City of Fallon Public Park. Determined to alleviate the lack of transportation in her community, Lisa collaborated with community agencies to incorporate a new public transportation system for all of Churchill County thus mitigating the issue in Fallon.

Lisa's hard work within the public school system brought about the Community Special Education Advisory Committee for the Churchill County School District and Parent Support Groups to promote a better understanding of inclusion and special Education Programs and the services available. She also arbitrated with the School District and parents in eight rural counties for Individual Education Programs to assist with compliance of the ADA, IDEA and the Rehab Act to promote the most effective learning environment for the students.

Lisa is currently involved with several groups and advisory committees including the Nevada State Special Education Advisory Committee. She is Secretary and was formerly Treasurer of the Churchill Area Regional Transportation Committee and serves on the Ticket to Work/Medicaid Infrastructure Grant Advisory Group, Rural Region and the Family Ties Advisory Board. Lisa was Chair of the Family Resource Center Neighborhood Council for 5 years and served on the Governor's Task Force on Disability Transition Subcommittee.

Having managed over 500 case files, Lisa daily promotes independent living to individuals through advocacy, benefits assistance, education, vocational efforts, communication and home modifications. She directs the advisory board and volunteers in the community for fundraising events and activities, one being the Journey of Hope tour raises over \$300,000 annually to promote disability awareness. Lisa also coordinates with local businesses, public and private entities to provide technical assistance for ADA compliance. It's a "win-win" situation where businesses earn tax credits and furthers business capacity by becoming compliant and enhances accessibility and inclusion for the community.

Continual training and education keeps Lisa involved and informed about the advances and challenges still faced by people with disabilities. Some of her endeavors have been to participate in two Federal monitoring. She has attended the RSA training on the annual 704 Report and administered the rural reports. Lisa has attended countless workshops and trainings on everything from leadership to fair housing.

Lisa Erquiaga is the essence of the Rural Advocate. She believes in and promotes the IL Philosophy and Mission and lives as an example very day of her life. This is evident in how her staff admires and respects her and is especially evident in the lives of the people she has worked with...they love her! Her son Owen is also a bright, kind and passionate advocate. That is something one can only learn from example, from his greatest advocate...his Mom.

