

## CONFERENCE SPEAKER BIOS

### **Karen Artus**

Karen Artus is a parent first. Being a parent gives her true insight to the rewards and challenges of raising an exceptional child. Karen combines that insight and passion with legislative advocacy experience. She is a graduate of the Partners and Policy Making Program. Karen holds the leader position for Region 9 LaCAN which is the advocacy arm of the Developmental Disabilities Council. She has provided effective advocacy training, mentored advocates on legislative visits and supported many a committee testimony. For the past 4 legislative sessions and numerous special sessions she has educated policymakers, empowered parents, and inspired professionals to voice their concerns regarding developmental disability issues.

### **Gerlinde Beckers, Ph.D.**

Dr. Gerlinde Beckers is an Associate Professor and Director of Lion Connected at Southeastern Louisiana University in the College of Education and holds the Billups Research Endowment. This is her 29<sup>th</sup> year in the field of Special Education. Dr. Beckers teaches special education courses at both the undergraduate and graduate level. She recently received the 2019 Iva Dean Cook Educator of the Year Award from the Council for Exceptional Children - Division on Career Development and Transition. In 2019, under Dr. Beckers' guidance Lions Connected received a 2019 Exemplary Program Award in the area of Vocational Training from the American Council on Rural Special Education. She is currently supervising

undergraduate student research in the area of self-efficacy and performance of peer mentors involved in a post-secondary inclusive transition program for individuals with disabilities. Dr. Beckers has numerous publications and presentation at the state, national, and international level.

### **Mary Breaud, M.Ed., Ed.D.**

Dr. Mary Breaud, assistant professor of education, earned her doctorate in Educational Leadership with a concentration in special education disabilities. Prior to her employment at Nicholls, she was a public school teacher, assistant principal, and special education district administrator. Breaud serves as a Lafourche Parish School Board Member for District 5. Breaud currently teaches courses inclusive of special education at the undergraduate level and educational leadership at the graduate level. She has provided services for local district teachers serving as mentors as outlined in awarded Louisiana Believe and Prepare Grants. Breaud served on the committee to develop the Louisiana Birth to Kindergarten Statewide Curriculum and was a member of the K-2 subcommittee reviewing the Common Core State Standards for the Louisiana Department of Education. Breaud was awarded the 2018 Educator of the Year Award for the Governor's Outstanding Leadership in Disabilities. Breaud is co-author for peer reviewed journal articles to include: *Pre-Kindergarten Teachers' Understanding and Perceptions of the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS)* and *Perspectives of Special Education: Literature Review and Interview*. Both published in the September 2019 issue of Creative Education. Breaud is the co-creator and

program advisor for the Bridge to Independence Program, Louisiana's first certified Comprehensive Transition Program (CTP) at Nicholls State University. This program is a dual track program for students with intellectual disabilities to earn a certificate and also for students with Autism to earn an associate or bachelors degree of their choice. The program is in its fourth year of operation.

### **Rashad Bristo**

RaShad Bristo is a native and resident of Mansfield, LA. RaShad's childhood dream was to become a police officer. He decided to pursue that dream after graduating from Grambling State University with a Bachelor's Degree in Criminal Justice. RaShad is the only person in the state of Louisiana and the first person in the United States born with one arm to successfully graduate from a police academy and work in law enforcement in the capacities of deputy sheriff, D.A.R.E. officer, juvenile probation officer and correctional officer. Author of "BITTER or BETTER": Doing More With Less is RaShad's personal story of excelling beyond the bitterness and frustration of his physical disability to pursue his dreams and live a fulfilling life. RaShad is a member of the National Speakers Association and board member of the Foodbank of Northwest Louisiana, Statewide Independent Living Council and New Horizons Independent Living Center. As an author and motivational speaker, RaShad travels throughout the U.S. sharing with conferences, businesses, churches and schools that "Your condition is not your conclusion." RaShad is a graduate of Partners in Policymaking.

## **Katherine Carol**

Katherine Carol, of Denver, is the co-chair of the Employment First Advisory Partnership and currently serves on the Colorado State Rehabilitation Council as a representative of parents of individuals with disabilities. Ms. Carol is a recognized subject matter expert by the US Department of Labor, Office of Disability Employment Policy. She serves as a Director on the Board of the Washington Initiative for Supported Employment, a co-founder of Families on the Forefront of Technology and former organization consultant at the University of North Colorado. Ms. Carol served as Chair of the Colorado Development Disabilities Council for two years and two terms. Ms. Carol has extensive work history assisting people with developmental/intellectual disabilities to secure supported or customized employment. She consults on organizational transformation, is a speaker, a parent of an adult daughter, Mikelle, with special needs, and a published author. Mikelle and Katherine host The Shining Beautiful Series Podcast and are regular bloggers on Mikelle's website, [www.TheShiningBeautifulSeries.com](http://www.TheShiningBeautifulSeries.com).

## **Maria Caserta**

Maria Caserta is the Leader and one of the original founding members of the People First Chapter of Louisiana Northshore Chapter. Maria represents People First when she serves on the Florida Parishes Human Services Authority Developmental Disabilities Services Regional Advisory Committee. She is a graduate of the Partners in Policymaking Program. She is an active award winning member of the LACAN Region 9 Team. She has attended many legislative committee meetings and used her

personal story to advocate for services for people with developmental and intellectual disabilities in Louisiana. She is a great mentor to the other members of the People First Northshore Chapter.

### **Lillian DeJean**

Lillian DeJean is a seventeen year old from Lafayette, Louisiana living with multiple rare and complex medical conditions. Lillian currently serves as a self-advocate on the Louisiana Developmental Disabilities Council, and is the first youth to hold this position. Through advocacy and public speaking, Lillian aspires to educate others about the complexities of growing up chronically ill while also being able to set & achieve goals for the future.

### **April Dunn**

April Dunn is a passionate self-advocate who leads by example. She understands the importance of being involved in systems change advocacy and passionately communicates that to others. April was instrumental in advocating for the passage of two Louisiana laws granting students with disabilities access to pathways to a high school diploma: Acts 833 and 303. April has been a member of the Council since November 2014, serving as Chair since October 2017, and previously one term as Vice-Chair. She is a graduate of Partners in Policymaking and an active member of LaCAN, as well as numerous other advisory councils, task forces, and work groups. She is currently employed in the Governor's Office of Disability Affairs as a Senior Coordinator.

## **Shawn Fleming**

Shawn Fleming is the Deputy Director of the Louisiana Developmental Disabilities Council and serves on the leadership team for both LaCAN to promote grassroots advocacy agendas. Mr. Fleming has over 28 years of experience working to create systems that effectively support people with developmental disabilities. He has been involved with Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports since 1993, serving as a trainer with the Office for Citizens with Developmental Disabilities, the state coordinator at Louisiana State University and then with the Louisiana Department of Education. While with the Department of Education, he also served as the Coordinator of Autism services.

## **Amy Greer, Ph.D.**

Dr. Amy Greer received her doctoral degree in Applied Developmental Psychology from the University of New Orleans in 1996. She has worked extensively in Louisiana in both community and psychiatric treatment programs providing behavioral health services, staff training, and support planning to individuals with developmental disabilities. In Texas she worked in administrative and clinical programmatic design for community safety-net programs supporting persons with dual diagnosis, as well as autism spectrum disorders. As the Associate Clinical Director she is an appointed member to the Louisiana Sex Offender Assessment Panel and the Louisiana Behavioral Health Advisory Council. She serves as the chair for the Office for Citizens with Developmental Disabilities Clinical Review Committee; conducts data analysis on state-wide diversion and placement referrals;

researches and provides clinical recommendations on best practices and specialized treatment programs to guide service model development; conducts reviews of Pervasive Plus requests; and serves as a resource to advise on clinical issues related to developmental disability eligibility, Preadmission Screening and Resident Review, and the Office for Citizens with Developmental Disabilities Non-Consensual Sexual Behavior process.

### **Julie Foster Hagan, M.Ed., M.B.A.**

Julie Foster Hagan has served as the Assistant Secretary for the Office for Citizens with Developmental Disabilities for the past year, and she served as Deputy Assistant Secretary for the Office for the previous three years. Julie has worked for Office for Citizens with Developmental Disabilities for more than 20 years in several leadership roles, including Administrator of North Lake Supports and Services Center and Program Manager of the statewide Office for Citizens with Developmental Disabilities Resource Center. Julie serves on the National Policy Workgroup with the National Association of State Directors of Developmental Disabilities Services. Her drive is to foster quality improvements in the intellectual/developmental disabilities (I/DD) service delivery system that will help people to have more independent and meaningful lives in the community. Julie obtained Bachelor of Arts and Master of Education degrees in the field of Speech/Language Pathology and Master of Business Administration, with a concentration in Health Care Administration from Southeastern Louisiana University. She is married to Darren and she has one son, three stepchildren, and two grandchildren.

### **Cindy Heying, M.Ed.**

Mrs. Heying is a native of Opelousas, LA. She graduated from the University of Louisiana at Lafayette and began her career as a Social Service Worker. In 1994 she became certified as a Special Education Teacher in Texas. At Midwestern State University in Wichita Falls, TX, she completed her M. Ed. in Special Education with a concentration in Diagnostics. She has taught in public schools in Louisiana, Texas, and Virginia. She also conducted diagnostic testing for the Wisconsin Department of Juvenile Corrections. Cindy has worked in Inclusive Higher Education in community college settings for over 12 years. Her first ten years were spent with the Transition Program at Central Virginia Community College in Lynchburg. This program received the 2007 Department of Rehabilitative Services Commissioner's Award for Program Best Practices. After a move back to her home state, she became the Director of Bossier Parish Community College's comprehensive transition and postsecondary program, the Program for Successful Employment (PSE) in 2017.

### **Steve Jankower, J.D.**

Steve Jankower has practiced law in Lafayette, Louisiana for over 37 years. He has focused his practice on Medicaid planning for individuals with disabilities and special needs, elder law, successions, estate planning, and related issues. He is a graduate of the University of Southwestern Louisiana (now the University of Louisiana at Lafayette) and a 1982 graduate of the Louisiana State University Law Center. Steve is also the father of a child with special needs which has allowed him to bring unique personal



experiences and perspective to the assistance he provides to his clients. Steve currently serves on the Board of Directors of LARC and is a past president of the organization. Steve is a member of the National Association of Elder Law Attorneys, the Academy of Special Needs Planners, and the Louisiana Association for Justice. Steve has been a frequent lecturer at seminars throughout Louisiana for many years. He has also written several published articles on the subject of estate planning for individuals with disabilities through use of special needs trusts, including an article entitled *“Why Every Attorney Should Consider Medicaid Planning Issues When Settling Personal Injury Claims”* previously published in the Louisiana Bar Journal. Steve also writes a regular newsletter on Medicaid planning issues.

### **Caroline Jurisich, Ed.D.**

Dr. Caroline Jurisich serves as the Director for UL LIFE at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. Prior to joining the program in 2015, she taught in the Lafayette Parish public school system in a self-contained behavioral disorders classroom. Her transition to postsecondary education began as the Academic Instructor for the University of Louisiana LIFE program. While teaching the functional academics courses, she began to truly develop a passion for furthering the educational opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities. In 2017, Dr. Jurisich became the Director and now leads the University of Louisiana LIFE team. The program has expanded from 12 students to 19 students, and more growth is expected in the future. She holds a Master of Arts in Teaching degree and a Doctorate in Educational Leadership, both from UL

Lafayette. Her research focuses on the transition process from high school to postsecondary education, sexual education for students with intellectual/developmental disabilities, and the impact of postsecondary education programs on college campuses. Through this research, Dr. Jurisich hopes to provide greater access and support for students and their families as they prepare for and enter postsecondary education, increase the sexual safety knowledge of her students, and assist other colleges and universities in their development of these programs.

### **Jen Katzman, J.D.**

Jen Katzman has more than 10 years' experience in public policy, legislative affairs, and finance from the Road Home Program, the Legislative Fiscal Office (LFO), and the Louisiana Department of Health (LDH). She started her healthcare career as a fiscal analyst at the LFO monitoring the charity hospital system under the Health Care Services Division and analyzing budgets within LDH such as the Office of Behavioral Health, the Office of Public Health and the Local Governing Entities. Upon transferring to LDH in 2013, she began working on the executive staff of the Office of Behavioral Health as the Director of Research and Special Projects. Since the beginning of 2016, she has been working in the Bureau of Health Services Financing (i.e., Medicaid) serving on the Medicaid Director's executive staff coordinating special projects, as Medicaid Chief of Staff, and now as Deputy Director over Public Affairs, Policy, and Waivers. Jen holds a J.D. from LSU and volunteers with Companion Animal Alliance and the Junior League of Baton Rouge.

## **Brandi Kelly, Ph.D.**

Dr. Brandi Kelly has devoted her career to making a difference in the lives of persons with developmental disabilities. As a clinical psychologist she has been engaged in leadership, program development, and policy-making within Louisiana's developmental disability service system for 20 years. Her life-long advocacy efforts began at home when her youngest sister was born with a developmental disability. Dr. Kelly received her doctoral degree in clinical psychology from Louisiana State University in 1998 and a post-doctoral master's degree in clinical psychopharmacology from Alliant University in 2002. She has worked extensively in community and residential-based programs providing support planning, staff training, and behavioral health services to individuals with developmental disabilities and has published research on assessment and treatment of behavioral and mental health concerns of individuals with developmental disabilities. She has been instrumental in several key initiatives in Louisiana to increase capacity to successfully support individuals with co-occurring needs to live/work in their communities while navigating the logistics of fiscal and resource challenges in partnership with self-advocates, advocacy organizations, providers, and other state agencies. She is a recipient of the Bernard R. Wagner Leadership in Developmental Disabilities award and currently sits on the National Association for Dual Diagnosis Continuing Education and Conference Committee as the chair for the upcoming 2019 annual conference.

### **Colleen Klein-Ezell, Ph.D.**

Dr. Colleen Klein-Ezell is a Professor and Department Head of Teaching & Learning at Southeastern Louisiana University. She was one of the original committee members that developed the Lions Connected Post-Secondary Transition Program at Southeastern. She holds the Pennington Endowed Professorship in Special Education. This is her 37<sup>th</sup> year in Special Education, 14 years in the public schools and 23 years at the university level. Dr. Klein-Ezell teaches Special Education and Early Intervention courses at Southeastern at both the undergraduate and graduate level. In 2016, Dr. Klein-Ezell was awarded the President's Faculty Excellence in Service Award at Southeastern. She continues to serve on the Louisiana State Interagency Coordinating Council (SICC), an advisory board to Early Steps, originally being appointed by the Governor in 2008. Dr. Klein-Ezell has numerous publications and presentations at the state, national, and international level. She has served on the Louisiana Council for Exceptional Children's Executive Board in many leadership roles since 2008.

### **Girard J. Melancon, Ph.D.**

Dr. Melancon has worked with sector-based workforce training programs for over 20 years. Over these years he has invested more 70 million foundation and taxpayer dollars into progressive workforce development initiatives. He served on Governor Bobby Jindal's transition team, addressing the economic needs of the working class in Louisiana. During his tenure as Executive Director of Workforce Development at Baton Rouge Community College, the workforce education department grew from serving 350

students to meeting the needs of over 2500 students a year while generating over 2 million dollars in annual revenue. In his current position as Vice Chancellor for Workforce Solutions, Dr. Melancon is in the process of redeveloping contract training programs, growing allied healthcare programs, and developing IT & Cyber Security programs. Dr. Melancon also serves as President of The National Council for Workforce Education (NCWE) – a 700 member organization. Dr. Melancon has previously served in appointed positions within the Office of Juvenile Justice and the Louisiana Workforce Commission where he leveraged state and federal funding to provide educational reform and workforce development opportunities to at-risk and disadvantaged populations in the State of Louisiana.

### **Charles Michel, Ed.D.**

Charlie Michel is a 64-year-old father of two children with disabilities (ages 38 and 34) and have been married for 42 years. My hobbies are cooking and eating (two things which, by the way, go VERY well together). I enjoy cooking for family members and a gathering of 30 people at my home is considered relatively small.

I am a career educator who, after 34 years of being a special education teacher (8 years), general education teacher (1 year), high school assistant principal (3 years), high school principal (1 year), middle school assistant principal (1 year), middle school principal (7 years), central office coordinator (3 years) and special education director (10 years), decided the time was right to retire. Just as I made that decision, this job became available so I applied for it. I wanted this job because it allows me to continue my

advocacy work for children with disabilities. While the “side of the table” from which I am advocating may be different now, the issues remain the same as does my passion for the right outcome for children. It is truly my privilege to be here and I only hope that I help to make someone’s life just a little bit better just as this job is doing for me.

### **Angela Montgomery**

Angela Montgomery, serves as the Supported Employment Program Coordinator with Louisiana Rehabilitation Services (LRS). She is a native of Baton Rouge, LA and has been employed by LRS for 12 years. She started with the agency as a Rehabilitation Counselor and later worked as a Rehabilitation Employment Development Specialist. Prior to working for LRS, Angela began her career in Vocational Rehabilitation as an Employment Specialist with Baton Rouge Vocational Services, formerly a division of the Arc of Baton Rouge. Angela obtained a Master’s Degree in Rehabilitation Counseling from Southern University and is a proud graduate of Glen Oaks High School.

### **Rosemary Morales**

Rosemary Morales holds a Master’s degree in General Counseling and Guidance from Louisiana Tech University. She has been working in the realm of employment for individuals with disabilities for over 20 years. Rosemary worked for 10 years with Louisiana Rehabilitation Services in various capacities prior to her current employment with Office for Citizens with Developmental Disabilities. Rosemary is currently working to ensure compliance

with the Home and Community Based Services Settings Rule and to redesign the employment and day services within the waivers. She serves as the liaison for the State Employment Leadership Network, serves on the State Independent Living Council and various other committees and work groups centered around increasing employment outcomes for people with disabilities.

### **Sigmund Morel**

Sigmund Morel is the Program Coordinator for Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) with Louisiana Rehabilitation Services (LRS). He has been with LRS for almost 7 years. Prior to LRS, he work for 16 years with student financial assistance programs preparing high school students for college, including 13 year with Louisiana Office of Student Financial Assistance (LOSFA) that administers the TOPS scholarship program. Sigmund says he has a desire for students to have all the tools needed to be successful in all of their future endeavors.

### **Bambi Polotzola**

A state leader in disability issues for over a decade, Bambi Polotzola, has worked with people with disabilities and their families as an educator and as a home and community based service provider. She has served on the Executive Committee of the Louisiana Developmental Disabilities Council as well as on the boards of numerous disability-related non-profit organizations. As a mother of a teenager with a disability, Bambi understands the needs of families and is respected for her knowledge and advocacy on their behalf. Her work has primarily been centered in capacity



building and systemic change that supports people with disabilities and their families to be fully included and valued members of their communities. Bambi received her Bachelor Degrees in Accounting and Special Education from the University of Louisiana at Lafayette and her Masters in Educational Leadership from the American College of Education. She is also a graduate of Louisiana Partners in Policymaking. Bambi currently serves in the administration of Louisiana Governor John Bel Edwards as Executive Director of the Governor's Office of Disability Affairs. Through her consistent, conscientious, selfless work as a parent, organizer, spokesperson, fundraiser and social media voice for people with disabilities, Bambi has proven her commitment to the disabilities community and her ability in championing disability causes.

### **Tanya Murphy**

Tanya Murphy has served as the Regional Services Director for the Office for Citizens with Developmental Disabilities for two years and served as the Children's Choice Waiver Program Manager for the previous two years. Tanya is originally from Wyoming where she worked as a child protection social worker and investigator before moving to Louisiana. She has worked for OCDD for 21 years starting in Monroe, LA in 1998. In 2001, she transferred to OCDD in Bossier City and in 2015 transferred to Baton Rouge. Tanya obtained Bachelor of Arts in the field of Psychology with an emphasis in substance abuse and a minor in criminology. She has two children ages 21 and 17 and two cats age 14.



## **Brenda Sharp**

Brenda Sharp is currently employed as a program manager with EarlySteps for the Office for Citizens with Developmental Disabilities as a part of Louisiana Department of Health since June 2007. Brenda's history with Early Intervention also includes serving on the State Interagency Coordinating Council as a public agency representative and currently representing the lead agency. Brenda has served as the NICU Discharge Coordinator and NICU follow up clinic coordinator with LSU Health Sciences Center, Department of Pediatrics at Earl K. Long Medical Center. She has also worked as the director of regional early intervention program with the arc-Baton Rouge for 8 years. More of her previous employment includes serving as the coordinator of a federally funded parent education program with the Louisiana department of education for families with children with severe disabilities and a speech-language pathologist with East Baton Rouge Parish School system.

## **Angela Shockley, R.N.**

Angela Shockley is a Registered Nurse with a degree from LSU School of Nursing in New Orleans, Louisiana. She also holds a Baccalaureate degree in Health Care Management from College of St. Francis in Joliet, Illinois. Ms. Shockley has specialized in the field of developmental disabilities for the past 32 years, with a focus on Program Development and Education. She has managed and directed community based programs, both in the private and government sectors for people with both mental illness and

developmental disabilities. She assisted in the Federal Government's revision of the ADA laws for the state of Louisiana, and assisted in the development of the State's Quality Assurance tool for children's health care needs, and has most recently assisted in the development of the first Developmental Medicine Education Curriculum for Family Medicine Physicians in the country. She has developed with the collaboration of Boston Medical School and LSU Health Sciences Center, the Louisiana Operation House Call Program and had been appointed to work with the Governor's office as the OCDD representative on the state leadership team of Primary Care and Behavioral Health Integration. Ms Shockley is the Chairperson for the Statewide Mortality Review Committee, and a member of the Alzheimer's Task Force as well as past president of AAIDD, Louisiana Chapter. Ms Shockley is a major contributor to the development of the Federal Granted Louisiana My Place Program and co-author of the State's CMA Curriculum. She is employed by the Louisiana Department of Health at the OCDD Resource Center as the statewide OCDD RN Manager. Ms. Shockley has been recognized as one of the top 2,000 Notable American Women by the American Biographical Institute and was nominated into Who's Who in American Nursing and the Cambridge Who's Who of Professional and Executive Women for her dedication and work in the field of developmental disabilities and mental health integration.

## Brad Sweazy

With a career spanning more than 25 years in the housing industry, Bradley R. Sweazy serves as the Chief Operating Officer for the Louisiana Housing Corporation. Under his leadership, the LHC restored the homebuyer program that had been offline for 18 months and earned over \$2 million in profits its first year. Brad was also instrumental in creating the corporation's first statewide homebuyer counseling program. Since starting his career with very humble beginnings as a groundskeeper working his way through college, Brad has worked with numerous federal and state programs, which focused on affordable housing, transportation, community revitalization, economic development, and disaster recovery. Prior to joining the LHC, Brad served as the Chief Program Officer for the Kentucky Housing Corporation. In this role, he led a 250-member team and was instrumental in the agency earning recognition as one of the Top 10 housing finance agencies in the nation. As the State's Housing Program Manager, Brad oversaw \$100 million in Disaster CDGB and NSP 1 and 3 funds. Through Brad's efforts, HUD recognized Louisiana as the disaster housing best practice. In his role as the East Baton Rouge Parish Director of Community Development, Brad protected millions of HUD funds from being recaptured, restored Community Housing Development Organizations partnership with the Office of Community Development, and established projects to address blight. Brad has a passion for serving the community, and believes that by building strong public-private partnerships we can make positive forward progress to improve housing, strengthen communities, and ultimately change lives.

## Robin Wagner

Robin Wagner is Deputy Assistant Secretary for the Office of Aging and Adult Services within the Louisiana Department of Health. She oversees major Medicaid programs delivering over a billion dollars in services to older adults and persons with adult onset disabilities. These include the major home and community-based programs for this population, Program for All Inclusive Care for the Elderly (PACE), and Money Follows the Person. Robin has been involved in Louisiana's Permanent Supportive Housing program since planning began in late 2005, and was the chief advocate for that program within the Department of Health. She has been responsible for LDH's oversight of the program for most of its existence. Louisiana's Permanent Supportive Housing program has garnered national attention for its cross-disability focus, success in addressing homelessness and institutionalization, and innovation in covering tenancy supports under Medicaid. Robin obtained her Masters degree in Social Work from Tulane in 1990 with certification in Gerontology. She has been a faculty member in Geriatric Psychiatry at LSU Medical School and served on the faculty of Tulane Graduate School of Social Work for seven years prior to her work for the State of Louisiana. In addition to her work at LDH, she has also worked for the Louisiana Governor's Office of Disability Affairs where she led development of the state's Olmstead plan.