

Andrea Stolz

Andrea grew up on Long Island, a clumsy, book-loving day-dreamer. The kind of kid that exasperated teachers because she never seemed “to work to her potential,” but was “nice—not a troublemaker.” Her teachers had an incomplete picture of who she was, though. What they were unable to observe was a home life that was rife with challenges, where she was tasked with adult responsibilities from an early age due to the health crises, mental illness, and substance abuse issues of her parents.

This is the beginning of her lived experience as a Family Peer Advocate.

After high school, she went to college in Virginia, where she studied literature, written composition, and education. The summer prior to her senior year she met a young man she eventually married. She has since been married for more than thirty years, ten years as a military family, and has two children, now young adults.

Her oldest, is autistic and transgender. She grew up “an alphabet kid” with a slew of learning disabilities as well as ADHD and anxiety. Her youngest child also initially had academic challenges. He lives with an ultra-rare complex autoimmune disorder that took years of hospitalizations to diagnose. He subsequently required early intervention and special education. Supporting them is another vital piece of her lived experience as a Family Peer Advocate.

After living in 4 states in ten years as a military family they began to understand the extent of the challenges that their children were navigating and knew they had to return home to Long Island where there were good schools and hospitals and a support network of family and friends.

She began to contribute articles to a parenting website associated with Wired Magazine in turn she felt a quiet calling to do work that had a more significant social impact. She felt a deep need to use her lived experiences to help others, so she began applying for advocacy positions and was ultimately hired as a Family Peer Advocate for Family Service League’s Parent to Parent program and became credentialed by Families Together in New York State. For ten years she worked as an FPA. She left this work for a few years in order to take care of her aging parents.

Last summer she was hired for the Executive Director position of Long Island Families Together. Within six weeks of walking through the door of LIFT, she had organized their annual legislative breakfast, pivoted it to virtual as COVID-19 numbers rose, coordinated with the tech team at Families Together in New York State to support our effort, and created LIFT’s Legislative Action Committee—which was initially created from the roundtable of caregivers that spoke at the breakfast. She was particularly excited about the potential of LIFT’s Legislative Action Committee. Which is an important component for both creating new leaders and their mission.

In a strange way, Andrea feels as if COVID-19 has paved the way toward an era of opportunity. The barely sustainable elements of our system of care now absolutely must be reimaged. She feels that LIFT is at a tipping point and is excited, amazed and humbled to have the chance to contribute her voice and ideas to the creation of improvements at this time.

If you would like to find out more about the work that LIFT does, please reach out to me by email at astolz@LIFT4kids.org or by phone at 631-264-LIFT (x103).