

WINTER 2023/2024



# THE CONNECTION

OFFICIAL NEWSLETTER OF THE ARC TENNESSEE



## THE ARC TENNESSEE INTRODUCES ITS NEW EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

### A MESSAGE FROM BOARD PRESIDENT, KAREN DOWNER

I am pleased to announce the appointment of Dr. Robbie Faulkner as The Arc TN's new Executive Director, effective December 4, 2023. Dr. Faulkner brings a wealth of experience and a deep commitment to advancing the rights and well-being of individuals with disabilities.

I am also extremely grateful to Robyn Lampley for dedicating so much time as Interim Director to sorting out The Arc TN's financial management system and ensuring obligations were met during the last six months. We faced difficult challenges during this time that were complicated as some grants were slow to renew. Going forward the challenges are now better defined and hard work by all staff will sustain this organization and its important work.

Dr. Robbie Faulkner comes to The Arc Tennessee after 31 years in education. She served as a classroom teacher, middle school principal, and Director of Secondary Education. As Director of Secondary Education for Dickson County Schools, Dr. Faulkner's top priority was ensuring every student was ready for whatever path

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DR. ROBBIE FAULKNER, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE ARC TENNESSEE

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## LEADERSHIP TEAM

**DR. ROBBIE FAULKNER**  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

**HEATHER HENDERSON**  
ADVOCACY

**ASHLEY COULTER**  
COMMUNICATIONS & PUBLIC  
AWARENESS

**FRANK MEEUWIS**  
QUALITY IMPROVEMENT & SYSTEMS  
CHANGE

**JEN APREA**  
FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

## EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

**KAREN DOWNER**  
PRESIDENT

**JEN VOGUS**  
VICE-PRESIDENT

**SHONTIE BROWN**  
SECRETARY

**JOHN LEWIS**  
TREASURER

**ROBYN LAMPLEY**  
PAST PRESIDENT

## MANY THANKS FOR THE WARM WELCOME

### A MESSAGE FROM OUR EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

I want to begin by thanking everyone who has been so gracious in welcoming me to The Arc Tennessee. My first few weeks can most accurately be described as a whirlwind as I began forming relationships with our community partners, participating in committee and advisory meetings, getting to know the staff, and watching the work they do. They are an impressive group of professionals, who do this work because they know its worth. A top priority for me is to shine a light on their efforts and to secure new partnerships to support our mission.

One way we fulfill that mission is through fundraising efforts, and our annual Light Up a Life is an integral part. This year we had some fabulous items, services, and trips donated.

Thank you to Pinnacle Bank Trust and Investment and First Horizon Bank for each donating \$1,000. Other monetary donations are still coming in, and we hope to have a total soon.

Finally, I will forever be grateful to Robyn Lampley for selflessly stepping down from her role as Board President to serve as Interim Director. She made my transition seamless and has been an extraordinary mentor.

Everyone at The Arc Tennessee wants to wish you all many blessings in 2024!

*-Robbie Faulkner*



**CHRIS ADAMS, WITH PINNACLE BANK TRUST, DELIVERING A CHECK TO ROBBIE FAULKNER, NEW EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE ARC TENNESSEE**

[WWW.THEARCTN.ORG](http://WWW.THEARCTN.ORG)



## Donor Appreciation!

Donations are greatly appreciated and help The Arc Tennessee continue to deliver advocacy, information and support to people with disabilities and their families. Many thanks to our donors who contributed between June 28 through December 15, 2023.

**DEANA VAUGHN  
ADELE DUNKIN  
FRANK MEEUWIS  
MARTHA SIMERL  
BEN SWARTZMAN  
DR. SHARON WEBB  
DR. ROBBIE FAULKNER**

**KATY CLOUSE  
SUSAN MCGRATH  
CHRISTINA PEARCE  
MARY BEARDEN  
REV. GARRY SPEICH  
ANONYMOUS**



With your support The Arc Tennessee is leading the fight for equality and inclusion, empowering people to live the lives they want, and inspiring a nationwide movement of advocates. With your help, we grow stronger. To donate on our website, scan the QR code shown here.

## JOIN US AS WE ADVOCATE. EDUCATE. CONNECT. AT THE 2024 BRIDGE TO SUCCESS CONFERENCE

### What is the 2024 Bridge to Success Conference?

The Arc TN's Advocacy and Family Engagement in Special Education Projects are excited to present the inaugural Bridge to Success Conference, a new one-day conference in April 2024. This conference will provide an opportunity for advocates, educators, and families to gather to learn how together we can build a bridge to success for individuals with disabilities.

### Who will be in attendance at the Bridge to Success Conference?

Attendees will include 150+ advocates, educators, self-advocates, and families from across the state of Tennessee as well as representatives from the 15 local chapters of The Arc Tennessee.

### When can I register for the 2024 Bridge to Success Conference?

Registration for the 2024 Bridge to Success Conference will open in early January.



# SAVE THE DATE

**APRIL 5,  
2024**

**FRANKLIN  
MARRIOTT  
COOL SPRINGS**  
700 COOL SPRINGS BLVD,  
FRANKLIN, TN 37067

Join The Arc TN, Family Engagement in Special Education and TN-TAN as we explore how educators, families and advocates can work together to  
**Advocate. Educate. Connect.**





## Family Engagement Update

by Jen Fisher

The Family Engagement in Special Education (FESPED) team recently became the newest partner with the Tennessee Technical Assistance Network (TN-TAN). TN-TAN provides school districts, administrators, educators, and families access to high-quality training, resources, and supports designed to improve outcomes for students with disabilities, ages 3-22. <https://tn-tan.tnedu.gov/>

The Family Engagement program is excited to be part of such an amazing team of providers. Along with the other TN-TAN partners, the network includes support in the areas of intensive behavior, preschool, autism, assistive technology, post-secondary transition, family engagement, and Response to Instruction and Intervention (RTI2) for academics and behavior. For a full list of TN-TAN partners, please visit <https://tn-tan.tnedu.gov/support-services>.

The FESPED project, through The Arc Tennessee, has been working with the Tennessee Department of Education since 2018 to increase family engagement in special education to improve outcomes for students with disabilities. The FESPED work primarily focuses on two groups – educators and families.

The goal for FESPED is to support schools through training, planning opportunities, and professional development that will help strategize ways to empower families to be more involved in their child’s special education journey. Our services are free and meant to lighten the load for districts and schools. FESPED can help educators better engage families to improve student outcomes and APR Indicator 8 (Parental Involvement) scores.

In addition, FESPED empowers parents and caregivers to increase family engagement in special education. The team provides family support, groups, educational events, resource fairs and other special education resources for families around the state. For FESPED events in your area, please check our events page at <https://familyengagementtn.com/events/>.



SCAN TO VISIT THE FAMILY ENGAGEMENT IN SPECIAL EDUCATION WEBSITE



**FAMILY ENGAGEMENT  
IN SPECIAL EDUCATION**



ANNETTE GRAVES, JASMINE ROBERTSON, AND JAMAR PICTURED AT A FAMILY RESOURCE NIGHT AT ALEXANDER ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, JACKSON MADISON CO. SCHOOL DISTRICT.



# People First Tennessee Update

BY FRANK MEEUWIS

Oh my! It sure feels special this time of year! Our days are getting quickly dark as we’ve already “fallen-back” from Daylight Savings to Standard Time, and temperatures have come down, causing leaves to change color. Time with family and food for Thanksgiving was just around the corner, and People First Dickson County grasped that spirit by focusing on gift-giving! On November 21st, 2023, Frank Meeuwis joined People First at the Bibb Community Center in White Bluff, TN to wrap donated presents for a family in their community.

You can see that we walk the talk! To us, the name “People First” means: the real importance of relating and interacting with each other as people, as fellow humans, with joy and sorrow, with friends and families, and just living life like us! Naming the group People First is to educate non-members that we are not somehow deficient or less-worthy because of a label—we are YOUR brothers and sisters, daughters and sons, we are your family, and share more in common than differences from any disability label! Like sharing in the joy that flows from generosity, by getting together for charity, for service, or in worship.

See what happens when people get together as members of a group? People First Tennessee is that group that welcomes all new and returning members with open hearts! People First members include all people, from educators and entrepreneurs to friends and family, from professionals and parents to public servants and clergy. Join or renew membership today by scanning the QR code below!

People First also gets together online at National Self-Advocacy Meetings every Thursday at 1:00 pm ET, Noon CT, and always the same link. For log in details, please email Frank Meeuwis at [fmeeuwis@thearctn.org](mailto:fmeeuwis@thearctn.org).

SCAN TO JOIN OR RENEW YOUR MEMBERSHIP TO PEOPLE FIRST TN



LOCAL PEOPLE FIRST CHAPTER MEMBERS AND CHRISTINE THEOFANOPOLOUS FROM DEVELOPMENTAL SERVICES OF DICKSON COUNTY, GATHERED ON NOVEMBER 21, 2023 AT THE BIBB COMMUNITY CENTER IN WHITE BLUFF TO WRAP GIFTS DONATED TO SUPPORT A LOCAL FAMILY.



## Shining the Light on The Arc Tennessee Advocates: West TN

BY HEATHER HENDERSON

Get to know a little about our Advocates in West Tennessee!

Theresa Smisor covers the Memphis/Shelby County area. Theresa is a passionate and outspoken advocate for those with which she works. She works tirelessly to help people live their best life and isn't afraid to challenge the status quo.

**Heather: How long have you worked at The Arc TN?**

**Theresa: I have worked at The Arc for almost 12 years.**

**Heather: What do you love most about your job?**

**Theresa: What I love most about my job is fighting along side, and fighting for people whose voice is not being heard.**

**Heather: Do you have any strategies for dealing with stress at work?**

**Theresa: My strategy for dealing with stress at work is to turn up my car stereo to full blast, play a lot of Queen and Foreigner, and then drive with the windows down.**

**Heather: What do you think our future looks like as a team?**

**Theresa: I think we have a great team at The Arc, and therefore that will impact our future, and our ability to help shape it into a positive one**

**Heather: What is something surprising that not many people know about you?**

**Theresa: Something that people may not know about me - I'm a huge science nerd and love reading scientific studies and articles on general biology, genetics, and physics.**

Tracey Cunningham provides advocacy for Jackson and many of the rural counties in West. She is a hard worker who demonstrates self-reliance and diligence in her work. She possesses a strong work ethic and focuses on assuring people are included and supported.

**Heather: How long have you worked at The Arc TN?**

**Tracey: 14 years**

**Heather: What do you love most about your job?**

**Tracey: Meeting new people**

**Heather: Do you have any strategies for dealing with stress at work?**

**Tracey: Getting advice from co-workers, taking time off, going out of town/mini vacation**

**Heather: What do you think our future looks like as a team?**

**Tracey: We work hard and we work well as a team, so the future has no choice but to be GREAT! The Arc has grown tremendously, obtaining new contracts. This comes from hard work and dedication from all involved.**

**Heather: What is something surprising that not many people know about you?**

**Tracey: I love to read - I enjoy curling up with a good book.**

Susan Bryant works with families and self-advocates in the Memphis area to educate them on their rights and how to advocate for what they want. As a parent to a child with disabilities, she shows an unwavering commitment to helping families learn and shows a genuine belief in the importance of their message.

**Heather: How long have you worked at The Arc TN?**

**Susan: Just over 5 years**

**Heather: What do you love most about your job?**

**Susan: The opportunity to connect with self-advocates, students, and their families who often share valuable resources and support with me in spite of the fact that they have reached out to request assistance from me as an advocate. I learn so many new ways to meet challenges from folks who are living good lives and embrace their challenges with courage and determination.**

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## Shining the Light continued

**Heather:** Do you have any strategies for dealing with stress at work?

**Susan:** I remind myself that each day a step in the right direction is enough, and the timeline for completion of a task is as individualized as the folks for whom I’m advocating.

**Heather:** What do you think our future looks like as a team?

**Susan:** Our future is both busy and bright, even though the demand is often greater than the supply. (Maybe a backwards way of defining job security!)

**Heather:** What is something surprising that not many people know about you?

**Susan:** I am not a coffee drinker-not very interesting or surprising, but all I could think of at this point.

## The Arc TN Announces New Executive Director continued

they chose after high school. For students with disabilities, this meant creating individualized transition plans and teaching students how to self-advocate with the goal of equipping them with the skills and confidence to enter the workforce.

I look forward to what Dr. Faulkner brings to the table in terms of educational issues and advocacy. From her own experience working in education, as well as parenting an individual with a disability, she has a deep understanding of how various issues impact the life of individuals with IDD.

Since her older son’s diagnosis of autism 27 years ago, Dr. Faulkner has looked to serve individuals with disabilities, and for many years, did so in the public education arena. For the last five years, she has served on the board of directors for Developmental Services of Dickson County. Her son and she were part of the Dickson All-Abilities Inclusion Team, which resulted from the Vanderbilt Kennedy Center Community Involvement Grant. She is eager to be a part of The Arc Tennessee because she has seen firsthand the power and importance of full inclusion.

Dr. Faulkner holds a Bachelor of Science degree from University of Tennessee at Knoxville. She earned a Master’s degree in Administration and Supervision from Tennessee State University, and a doctorate in Organizational Leadership from Trevecca Nazarene University. She is the proud parent of two sons and enjoys traveling, reading, and watching college football.

Please join me in welcoming Dr. Faulkner with your full support. There is so much to be done in improving the lives of individuals with IDD and everyday counts.

*-Karen Downer*



**Look for an email with local chapter updates to come soon. Send an email to [communications@thearctn.org](mailto:communications@thearctn.org) with any questions or to be added to our email list.**

Winter 2023/2024



545 Mainstream Drive, Suite 100  
Nashville, TN 37228-1213

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Visit [www.thearctn.org](http://www.thearctn.org) or scan the QR code to see if there is a local chapter in your area. You can join through your local chapter or as an at-large member of The Arc TN! If you have questions, please email [membership@thearctn.org](mailto:membership@thearctn.org).



You can also complete the form below and mail to:  
**The Arc Tennessee, 545 Mainstream Drive, Suite 100, Nashville, TN 37228**

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City, State & Zip Code \_\_\_\_\_

Phone Number \_\_\_\_\_ Email \_\_\_\_\_

Check all that apply:

**Enroll me as a member** (please circle: \$5 Self-Advocate, \$15 Individual, \$25 Family)

**Please accept this donation** (in honor of \_\_\_\_\_)

**Make check payable to The Arc Tennessee or call  
615-248-5878 ext: 317 to process membership dues or make a donation by phone.**