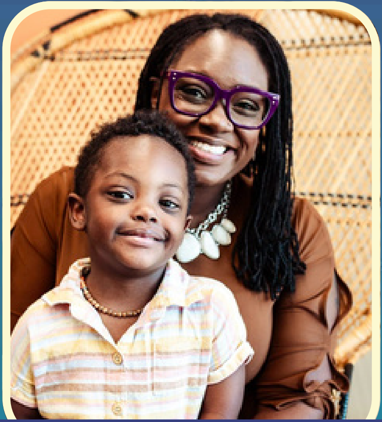
ATBC SPEAKERS

ALECIA TALBOTT



CRYSTAL LOTTERBERRY

HANNAH LACOUR

JESSIE SMART

JILLIAN BENFIELD

JULIE ROTHHOLZ

EVAN ROTHHOLZ

MAGALY DIAZ

JIM HUDSON

STEPHANIE SMITH LEE

HEATHER SACHS

JAWANDA MAST

LEARN MORE ABOUT OUR SPEAKERS!

JESSIE SMART

Jessie Smart is a dedicated self-advocate, community leader, and passionate voice for individuals with disabilities. She lives in Olive Branch, Mississippi, where she works as a bookkeeper for a landscape company. In addition to her professional work, she volunteers at The Arc of Northwest Mississippi and serves on its Board of Directors.

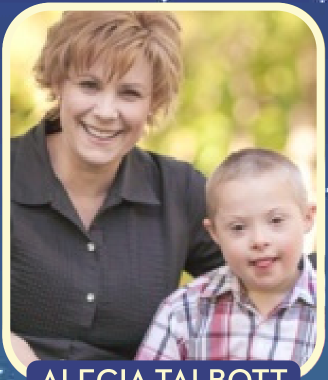
In 2024, she was honored with a gubernatorial appointment to the Mississippi Council on Developmental Disabilities, where she will serve a four-year term. This past February, she delivered the opening prayer and remarks before the Mississippi House of Representatives on Disability Awareness Day—a powerful moment that reflected her deep commitment to advocacy and inclusion.

She is a proud member of the National Down Syndrome Congress (NDSC) Policy & Advisory Council and the NDSC Self-Advocate Council. She also contributes her insight and experience to the National Down Syndrome Advocacy Coalition (NDAC) and has worked alongside the NDSC Policy Team for many years as part of the NDSC Advocacy Training Bootcamp team. Each year, she looks forward to helping train and inspire the next generation of advocates.

When she's not advocating, she enjoys singing in her church choir and spending time with her friends. Her love for community, service, and advocacy shines through in every aspect of her life.

JIM HUDSON

Jim Hudson is the NDSC Executive Director. He previously served as the Executive Director of the Down Syndrome Association of Greater Cincinnati since 2012. The DSAGC has tripled in size during his tenure in terms of its budget, staff team, and the number of programs. The DSAGC has been one of the model affiliates many organizations have emulated in the past decade. Jim is a proven nonprofit leader with decades of experience in various roles around the country. He has a wealth of leadership and fund development expertise and a track record of being a mission-focused leader who gets things done while caring for people. Jim has a long history of being connected with individuals and organizations that work with people with disabilities and their families. He has a Bachelor's in Business Management from Miami University and a Master's in Leadership from Fuller Seminary. In addition, Jim served as the Chapter President of the Cincinnati Chapter of the Association of Fundraising Professionals in 2018 and has been on a number of other nonprofit boards over the years.



ALECIA TALBOTT

Alecia became the executive director of DSAMT in 2012, after spending several years as an active member and volunteer in our organization and in the disability community. She received her BA & MA from Western Kentucky University, taught at Nashville State and Volunteer State Community Colleges, directed marketing at Passport Health Communications, Inc. and was a freelance marketing professional before joining DSAMT.

Ms. Talbott is a strong advocate for inclusion and acceptance for those with Down syndrome and other disabilities in the community and schools. Her passion lies in helping those with Down syndrome show the world that those with "something extra" bring extraordinary gifts to our communities, which should be recognized and valued.

During her 12+ year tenure at DSAMT she has served on the Disability Coalition for Education, Vanderbilt's Disability Pathfinder Advisory Committee, the Tennessee Disability Coalition Board of Directors, Davidson County Mayor's Advisory Committee for People with Disabilities, the Wilson County Family Support Advisory Board and Down Syndrome Affiliates in Action Board of Directors. She was named Best Buddies TN Champion of the Year in 2011 and in 2016 received the Nashville Business Journal's Woman of the Year Award. Under her leadership, DSAMT received the National Down Syndrome Congress Affiliate of the Year Award in 2020 and the Arc of TN Agency of Distinction Award in 2023. She is also an active National Down Syndrome Advocacy Coalition Member.

JILLIAN BENFIELD

Jillian Benfield is a former journalist and news anchor and the author of The Gift of the Unexpected- Discovering Who You were Meant to Be When Life Goes Off Plan, with her second book Overwhelmed & Grateful releasing this fall. She holds a broadcast journalism degree from the University of Georgia. After Jillian's son Anderson was born with Down syndrome, she began writing short essays about advocacy and living an unexpected life. Her essays have appeared on sites such as TODAY, Good Morning America, Yahoo! News, and ABC News. Jillian regularly advocates for the full inclusion of people with disabilities through her Facebook and Instagram pages as a part of the National Down Syndrome Congress's National Down Syndrome Advocacy Coalition. Jillian and her husband, Andy, and their three children make their home on Florida's space coast. Learn more at www.JillianBenfield.com where you can download her free ebook- Disability Advocacy 101- A Parent's Guide.

CRYSTAL LOTTERBERRY

Crystal Lotterberry is one of the co-founders of the Black Down Syndrome Association, the pioneering national organization focused on addressing the distinct needs of Black families and individuals with Down syndrome. In this role, she has had the privilege of engaging with thousands of Black families, gaining valuable insights, learning, and discovering innovative approaches to enhance outreach and accessibility. As a mother to a child with Down syndrome, her connection fuels her strong commitment to the work undertaken by BDSA. She is dedicated to ensuring that the organization stays true to its mission of connecting Black families within the Down Syndrome community to resources that significantly enhance their lives. This involves addressing the pervasive inequalities that create barriers to access, support, and education, fostering a more meaningful impact.

MAGALY DIAZ

Magaly Diaz has been serving the disability population for over six years. She has experience in working with the Texas Parent Training and Information center, as the Education Director for a local Down Syndrome Association, and holds a Bachelor's Degree in Art (Fashion). Magaly is the mother of two daughters and the older one is a preteen with the extra chromosome. Ever since the birth of her daughter, she became passionate about helping others navigate their journeys as parents of children with Down syndrome. She has been at NDSC for a year as the Multicultural Program Coordinator, which is doing all things Spanish for NDSC as well as coordinating Spanish webinars. This year was her first year participating in Texas Advocacy Day in Austin with several local families. Magaly is Bilingual in Spanish, enjoys local new eateries as well as spending time with family and friends.

HANNAH LACOUR

Hannah LaCour is a passionate self-advocate, community leader, and proud 2023 graduate of the University of Louisiana at Lafayette's LIFE Program, where she majored in Criminal Justice. During her time at ULL, Hannah served as a representative on the Student Government Association Board, was a proud member of Alpha Delta Pi Sorority, and actively participated in UL Leading LIFE and other campus organizations. Throughout her college years, Hannah gained valuable hands-on experience through internships with the Lafayette Parish Sheriff's Office and the Kenner Police Department. Today, she works for Sodexo Live! as a cold food prep cook at the Superdome and Smoothie King Center, and as a hostess at Ruby Slipper. Hannah currently serves on the Board of the National Down Syndrome Congress (NDSC) as a Self-Advocate Representative and was recently selected as the Athlete Representative for the Special Olympics Louisiana Law Enforcement Torch Run Committee. She is also the proud recipient of the 2018 Louisiana Governor's Outstanding Leadership in Disability Award in the Youth Leadership Category. Hannah has been a lifelong advocate for individuals with Down syndrome and other disabilities, with an advocacy résumé that includes meetings with local, state, and federal leaders. She has participated in multiple Buddy Walk on Washington events and advocated with the Global Down Syndrome Foundation for the DeOndra Dixon INCLUDE Project Act in December 2024. Her extracurricular activities have shaped her advocacy voice and include dancing, swimming, altar server, girl scouts, and a self-advocate with her local group, the Down Syndrome Association of Greater New Orleans. Hannah has attended nearly every NDSC Convention since 2005 and co-presented "Motivational Speaking 1-2-3" at the 2015 Youth and Adults Conference.

JAWANDA MAST

Jawanda Mast is the NDSC Grassroots Advocacy Manager. She has been involved in disability policy advocacy since her daughter Rachel was born with Down syndrome. Jawanda has graduate and undergraduate degrees from the University of Arkansas and was honored with the 2017 Alumni Community Service Award for her body of advocacy work. She and Rachel spent eight years advocating for the passage of the federal ABLE Act and have spoken around the country on ABLE, Advocacy, and Inclusion. She has provided written and oral testimony on a variety of federal and state policy issues and has served on many state-appointed committees.

Jawanda believes we all have a story and we can use those stories to impact change at all levels. She is passionate about the meaningful inclusion of individuals with Down syndrome and other intellectual disabilities in all aspects of the community and has presented at many conferences. Jawanda gives leadership to the NDSC National Down Syndrome Advocacy Coalition (NDAC) and the NDSC Advocacy Training Boot Camp at the NDSC Convention. Jawanda says her work is a #laborofloveandconviction. Jawanda, her husband Jonathan, and Rachel live in Olathe, Kansas.

JULIE ROTHHOLZ

Julie Gerhart-Rothholz is a wife, mom, pharmacist, and passionate advocate for individuals with Down syndrome and other disabilities. She began her advocacy journey in 2010, inspired by her son Evan, who is now 14. Alongside her husband, she helped establish the Pennsylvania Down Syndrome Advocacy Coalition and was part of the grassroots efforts to protect Medicaid in 2017. She currently serves as President of The Arc of Pennsylvania and is an active member of the National Down Syndrome Advocacy Coalition. Julie brings years of experience advocating at the local, state, and federal levels, and has presented at multiple Advocacy Training Bootcamps. A self-proclaimed AI aficionado, she loves exploring how artificial intelligence can make advocacy more efficient. When she's not advocating or cheering Evan on in bowling, baseball, bocce, or soccer, she enjoys reading, listening to podcasts, and planning auctions and raffles. Julie believes in learning from those ahead of us in the journey and reaching back to propel forward those who come behind us.

EVAN ROTHHOLZ

Evan is a 14-year-old rising high school freshman, natural leader, and enthusiastic self-advocate. Whether he's speaking with lawmakers about being able to save for college and life or cheering on his school's baseball team as the bat boy, Evan brings confidence, heart, and a big smile to everything he does. Evan has spoken up for inclusive education and funding for direct support professionals. He even had the once-in-a-lifetime experience of casting a vote on the House floor alongside a U.S. Representative. Evan spends most of his school day in general education and proudly plays on his school's Special Olympics Unified Bocce team. He also plays TOPSoccer and is on a Special Olympics bowling team. When he's not busy advocating or hanging out with friends watching high school sports, he's probably sharing fun facts about his favorite professional sports team mascots. Evan is excited to be co-presenting this session, sharing content modified using AI. His favorite personal motto says it all: "I am smart, I am strong, I can do hard things."

STEPHANIE SMITH LEE

Stephanie Smith Lee is an NDSC Policy & Advocacy Co-Director. She previously served as NDSC Interim Executive Director, Senior Policy Advisor, and Vice President of NDSC. Ms. Lee has over thirty-five years of public policy experience, including serving in senior staff positions in the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives. Since her daughter, Laura, was born with Down syndrome in 1982, she has led many successful disability advocacy efforts at the local, state, and federal levels. As the Director of the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) for the U.S. Department of Education, Ms. Lee directed the policy development, program planning, monitoring, evaluation, research, and implementation of IDEA, the federal special education law. As Senior Policy Advisor for the National Down Syndrome Society, she developed and trained an effective grassroots campaign, advocated with Congress, and directed a postsecondary project that developed inclusive postsecondary programs in various states, and led the successful effort to amend the Higher Education Act (HEA) to obtain federal financial aid and model programs for students with intellectual disabilities (ID). She continues that leadership role in the advocacy to retain the ID provisions in the HEA as Co-chair of the Inclusive Higher Education Committee. On behalf of NDSC, she also serves as the Past Chair of the National Coordinating Center Accreditation Workgroup. She is also the Board President of the Inclusive Higher Education Accreditation Council.

Ms. Lee has served on a variety of state and national commissions, including a Senate appointment to serve on the Ticket to Work and Work Incentives Advisory Committee. She has received many awards and honors, such as the "I.D.E.A. Hero Award" from The Arc of the U.S. for the key role she played in the successful reauthorization of I.D.E.A. in 1997 and the "Distinguished Service to Education Award" from George Mason University in 2007.

HEATHER SACHS

Heather Sachs is the Policy & Advocacy Co-Director for the National Down Syndrome Congress. She works with members of Congress and their staff, federal agencies, other national disability and civil rights organizations, and state and local advocates to educate them about policy issues that impact the civil rights and quality of life of individuals with Down syndrome. Residing Maryland (Washington DC metropolitan area) with her spouse, Heather is the proud parent of three children, one of whom has Down syndrome.

Prior to joining NDSC, Heather served as the Vice President of Advocacy & Public Policy for the National Down Syndrome Society and has over a decade of advocacy experience on the national, state and local levels. Heather is a founding member of the statewide Maryland Down syndrome Advocacy Coalition and a longtime member of the board of the Down Syndrome Network of Montgomery County, Inc. in Maryland. Appointed by Maryland Governor Larry Hogan in 2015, Heather served on the Maryland Achieving a Better Life Experience (ABLE) Task Force which laid the groundwork for establishing Maryland's ABLE program. In 2018, Heather was named one of Maryland's Top 100 Women by the Maryland Daily Record. She is a member of the District of Columbia Bar and was featured for her disability advocacy work in Washington Lawyer magazine. Heather received her B.A. from the University of Pennsylvania and her J.D. from Columbia University School of Law. In her free time, Heather enjoys hiking, gardening, and playing with her dogs.