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Michelle Hartmann Puryear : Distinguished Achievement Award - Public Service

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2008 Distinguished Achievement Award - Public Service

Michelle Hartmann Puryear '89

We've probably all heard the slogan "the power of one," and the oft-quoted phrase "never underestimate the power of one person to make a difference." Well, Michelle Hartmann Puryear is one St. Norbert graduate who has truly made a difference that will positively affect the lives and well-being of countless parents and their children.

Michelle graduated from St. Norbert College with an elementary education major and a minor in early childhood education. While she was in college, Michelle also pursued her love of music and dance by performing with the Swinging Knights and taking part in two of Dudley Birder's summer music theatre productions. As a result, she first followed her love of music after graduation by performing nationwide for nearly 10 years; highlights included singing the National Anthem at Lambeau Field for a Packers game, and singing background vocals for Reba McEntire. Michelle credits Professor Birder for this remarkable time in her life.

Her desire to teach was then realized when she began at St. Edward School in Nashville, Tenn., in 1999. There she created the pre-kindergarten program for the pre-K through 8 school, and is currently a lead teacher in this program, for which she is also the director. To add to her skills as a teacher, she earned a master's degree in curriculum and instruction in 2000, and a specialist in education leadership certification in 2002 from Middle Tennessee State University.

In 2006 Michelle and her husband, Matt (who is a teacher at Nashville's Father Ryan High School), had a daughter, Claire. Unfortunately, it wasn't until Claire was 5½ months old that they realized Claire had been born deaf. Although 44 states require a hearing test for all newborn babies, Tennessee did not.

As a consequence, Michelle decided that she didn't want any newborn child to go untested for possible deafness, and that the way to ensure newborn hearing screening was to enact a law to that effect. Thus began a lengthy journey. First, however, their daughter received a cochlear implant in one ear; and then, two months later, one in her other ear. Cochlear implants will provide Claire with the greatest likelihood of optimal hearing.

Michelle began contacting state legislators. A bill was introduced in January 2007 to require every newborn baby in Tennessee to be screened for hearing loss prior to being discharged from a hospital. This first bill was defeated.

After learning more about the process, Michelle enlisted the help of others, scheduled meetings with legislators, shared her and Claire’s story with as many legislators as she could, attended every vote as the bill passed through legislative committees, and helped work out differences with the bill’s opposition. All her work finally paid off as both the House and Senate unanimously passed the bill. On July 1, 2008, Tennessee’s governor signed the bill – now known as “Claire’s Law.”

Michelle’s work isn’t over, however. She continues to advocate for the deaf and hard of hearing, and she has started a deaf and hard of hearing awareness campaign to call attention to hearing loss, the number one birth defect in the United States.

As Michelle urges, “I hope that if life sends you on an unexpected journey, that you will not turn away from the challenge, but that you will embrace it and use your power of one to make a difference.”

St. Norbert College

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