



DOWN SYNDROME NETWORK ARIZONA  
PRESENTS  
10TH ANNUAL  
LIGHTS, CAMERA, AUCTION  
AWARDS GALA



**ROARING  
TWENTIES**

1920'S SPEAKEASY AT  
THE PHOENIX ZOO  
STONEHOUSE PAVILION

**APRIL 5, 2025**

ARIZONA  
**DSNetwork**  
ENRICHMENT CENTER ★ Down Syndrome Network

# SPARK OF AWESOME MOM AWARD

Amy Silverman is a journalist, memoirist, and teacher in her hometown, Phoenix. Over more than three decades, she's covered just about every topic under the Valley of the Sun, but when her daughter Sophie, now 21, was diagnosed with Down syndrome, Amy committed to finding better ways for journalists to cover people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

AMY  
Silverman

Her work seamlessly blends investigative journalism with memoir, drawing from Sophie's experiences, most notably in her book *My Heart Can't Even Believe It: A Story of Science, Love, and Down Syndrome*, published in 2016. Amy's writing has been featured on *This American Life* and in esteemed publications such as *ProPublica*, *Slate*, and the *Center for Public Integrity*.

Based in Phoenix, Amy co-founded the workshop *Mothers Who Write* and the storytelling show *Bar Flies*. She also created *WORDSLAW*, a storytelling program designed for people with intellectual disabilities and the communities around them. As a member of the advisory board for the National Center on Disability and Journalism, Amy has contributed to editing the center's disability language style guide. She also co-created *The Plain Truth Project*, an initiative aimed at understanding how people with intellectual disabilities access journalism and improving those efforts. Currently, Amy serves as the executive producer of *The Show* on KJZZ, Phoenix's NPR station, and is a columnist for *PHOENIX* magazine.



She lives with her husband Ray Stern, state politics reporter for the Arizona Republic, and Sophie, who is a student at Glendale Community College and a member of GCC's dance company, Verve. Annabelle, Sophie's older sister, is a dancer, musician and visual artist in Portland, Oregon.

You can learn more about Amy's work at [amy-silverman.com](http://amy-silverman.com)

# SPARK OF AWESOME DAD AWARD

**MARK**  
*Taylor*

*"I don't just lead this mission - I live it every single day as a father. My fight is personal, and my passion is permanent." – Mark D. Taylor*

Mark D. Taylor is a passionate father and advocate, and the Founder & Executive Director of Down Syndrome Forgotten, a nonprofit dedicated to bridging the gap between special needs families and essential community resources.

As a father to three incredible children, including a son with Down syndrome and autism, Mark's journey is deeply personal. His lived experience fuels his commitment to creating lasting change for families facing similar challenges.

Through Down Syndrome Forgotten, Mark has built a global network of support, empowering over 6,000 families through connections to speech therapy, occupational therapy, educational advocacy, and more. Mark is also the author of *Behind Closed Doors: Navigating the Unspoken Challenges of Special Needs*, a compelling book that sheds light on the raw, unspoken realities of caregiving and inclusion. He furthers this mission through the *Behind Closed Doors* podcast and movement, sparking powerful conversations that uplift and educate communities.

His advocacy is rooted in one belief: No family should ever feel forgotten. Whether through public speaking, mentorship, or community-building, Mark remains a relentless force for inclusion, awareness, and empowerment.

As the 2025 Spark of Awesome Dad of the Year, Mark stands as a beacon of love, resilience, and unwavering dedication to the Down syndrome and special needs communities.

You can learn more about Mark, the Down Syndrome Forgotten organization and his book, *Behind Closed Doors* by visiting [down-syndrome-forgotten.org](https://down-syndrome-forgotten.org)



**Past recipients: John Fraleigh, Sam Patel, Enzo Fiorenza, Mike Funk**

# SPARK OF AWESOME EDUCATOR

**JENNIFER**  
*Nelson*

Hailing from the Rocky Mountains in Greeley, Colorado, Jennifer Nelson began her career as a special education teacher in 2011. In her first year of teaching, she met Brett, a young boy with Down syndrome, whose life circumstances led him to stay briefly with Jennifer.

That short stay turned into three years, and in 2015, they became a forever family. Today, Jennifer is the proud mom of 21-year-old Brett, and together, they embrace life's adventures.

For the past 15 years, Jennifer has dedicated herself to teaching students with significant support needs, including those with Down syndrome, autism, cerebral palsy, and multiple disabilities. She spent eight years teaching in Colorado, including two as a special education director, before moving to Arizona. For the past seven years, she has taught in the Kyrene School District's Cross-Categorical Developmental Program, advocating for inclusion and ensuring her students have opportunities to participate in general education classes. She actively educates staff and students on the importance of acceptance, friendship, and meaningful participation, fostering an environment where relationships flourish.

Jennifer holds the distinction of bringing the Special Olympics Young Athletes program to Arizona and Kyrene, giving children of all abilities the same opportunities to develop core skills. Her students even competed in the state games as the only Young Athletes program in Arizona.



What Jennifer cherishes most about teaching is witnessing the joy in a student's eyes when they achieve something for the first time, whether it's walking, speaking, reading, or solving a math problem. Her passion, creativity, and commitment to unlocking the potential of every student make her a truly exceptional educator and advocate.

# OUTSTANDING ORGANIZATION

*“Together, we believe we can make a difference. Let’s work to reduce unemployment in the Down syndrome community and build a more inclusive world - one cup at a time.” - Karin York*



In 1990, at just 20 years old, Karin York became the mother of Spencer, who was born with Down syndrome. At the time, resources for families like hers were scarce, forcing her to adapt quickly and navigate an unfamiliar journey.

Inspired by Spencer's life, she pursued a career in special education, dedicating herself to supporting individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. As a high school special education teacher, Karin helped prepare students for the workforce but soon realized they faced significant barriers to employment. Determined to create opportunities, she and Spencer launched Spencer's Place, a coffee shop and bistro designed to employ adults with Down syndrome and other disabilities at competitive wages.

Through their nonprofit, Employed and Overjoyed Foundation, they established an internship program that provides essential workplace training. Job coaches focus on soft skills such as eye contact, voice inflection, social appropriateness, and customer service. With an unemployment rate of 80% among adults with disabilities, Karin is committed to changing that statistic by equipping individuals with the skills needed for meaningful, sustainable employment.

Karin's unwavering advocacy has earned her a long list of well-deserved accolades, reflecting her profound impact on the disability community. Her work continues to transform lives, creating lasting opportunities for individuals with disabilities and fostering a more inclusive society. Learn more at: [spencersplaceaz.com](http://spencersplaceaz.com)



**Past recipients: Phoenix Children's, Colten Cowell Foundation, Safeway & Albertson's Foundation, Rivers & Moorehead**

# SPARK OF AWESOME SELF ADVOCATE

From the moment she was born, Nohealani has defied expectations with her determination, creativity, and joyful spirit. Now 30 and thriving, Nohea embraces life to the fullest.

**NOHEA**  
*Palesano*

As the co-founder and heart of Hardly Perfect Design, a home-based jewelry and accessories business she runs with her sister, Nohea is a shining example of perseverance and self-advocacy. She plays an active role in every aspect of the business - modeling designs, beading bracelets, packing orders, and helping set up market booths with enthusiasm and care. She has an eye for color, a passion for design, and a gift for making customers feel welcome. At in-person markets, she truly shines - greeting shoppers with warmth, bagging purchases with pride, and making sure every child leaves with a smile and a sticker.

Beyond business, Nohea expresses herself through dance and Special Olympics cheerleading, bringing energy and encouragement wherever she goes. Whether performing at home, at events, or on social media, dancing is her passion and a way to spread joy. She also shares her creativity on TikTok, where her performances inspire smiles across the internet. She is an active participant in DSNetwork's Xcell program for Adults and also gives back to the community as a volunteer at events, where her kindness and enthusiasm brightens up a room.

Nohea has an incredible ability to make people feel special, and through her unwavering spirit, she doesn't just advocate for herself- she inspires an entire community to see ability before disability. Every day, she promotes acceptance, belonging and the belief that everyone has something valuable to offer.

Through her passion for business, dance, and community, Nohea is proving that we are all created with a purpose.

You can find her online store at [hardlyperfectdesign.com](http://hardlyperfectdesign.com)



**Past recipient: Samantha Derivan**

# OUTSTANDING SERVICE

Dr. Daniel Combs is an Assistant Professor of Pediatrics and Medicine at the University of Arizona, where he directs the clinical pediatric sleep medicine program at Banner University Medical Center in Tucson.

**DR. COMBS**  
*Daniel*

Board-certified in both pediatrics and sleep medicine, he completed a fellowship through the Arizona Leadership Education in Neurodevelopmental Disabilities (AZLEND) program during his training.

Dr. Combs is a dedicated researcher focused on improving health outcomes for individuals with Down syndrome and congenital heart disease. His NIH-funded research explores better treatments for obstructive sleep apnea in children with special healthcare needs.

He also studies how people with Down syndrome and their families make research-related decisions. His work has received support from the National Institutes of Health, Patient-Centered Outcomes Research Institute, American Heart Association, and other foundations.

Beyond his clinical and research efforts, Dr. Combs is passionate about working directly with individuals with Down syndrome of all ages, providing specialized care to improve their sleep health and overall well-being.

Outside of work, he enjoys board games with his son, science fair projects, and running 5Ks with his daughter.

His commitment to both his profession and family reflects his deep dedication to improving the lives of individuals with Down syndrome through research, advocacy, and compassionate care.

[sleep.uahs.arizona.edu/profile/daniel-combs-md](http://sleep.uahs.arizona.edu/profile/daniel-combs-md)

