



The Faces of HMEA - May 2004

Kathy Ryan is the Family Support Coordinator for the “Home First” program. Home First provides services to families of children who have complex medical needs and are in danger of a pediatric nursing home placement. Kathy’s job includes coordination of medical services with health care benefits, home nursing, educational services, and home modifications, among many other things.

She is the Mom of 22-year-old Owen, who has multiple physical and development challenges, 14-year-old Luke, and 11-year-old Maggie. She, her children and her husband, Peter Schneider, live in a Victorian house in Dorchester. Kathy calls it “vertical living” as city house lots are not usually large, but the Scheider family was lucky enough to have a backyard that allowed them to build an addition for Owen on the first floor. Owen has always lived at home with his family.

After earning a Master’s degree in Public Administration, Kathy went to work for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. She quickly learned that she really disliked working for government. So she quit her job, travelled across the U.S. trying to decide what she wanted to do, and returned to Massachusetts after three months. She later gave birth to her first son. After Owen was born, they knew that something was wrong, but could not identify what it was. Kathy learned that a friend was beginning a catering business, and she partnered with him. At that time, it was the perfect job because she worked odd hours, she



liked the business, and she could bring Owen to work with her and care for him herself. After a period of time, she became bored with the catering business, and worked for a friend who was in the styling business. Kathy’s job was to find locations and everything else needed for magazine covers. Later, she became an antiques buyer for a furniture store. There was again a lot of flexibility in the hours and the schedule was ideal for her. She said that working was a good break, because she didn’t know what was

wrong with Owen, and constantly worried about him. Work forced her to think of other things.

Kathy feels that it was her experience as a buyer that allowed her to develop the skills she uses now at HMEA. She stated that you cannot tell a photographer that you don’t have the sombrero for the cover of the magazine, and you can’t tell the bride that her cake won’t be ready until the day after the wedding. You have to get what people need in a timely manner and at the best price. So when a friend of hers who worked for DMR suggested that she apply for the coordinator position at HMEA, Kathy did. And now she helps families get what they need at the best possible price, whether it’s a van, a lift mounted on the ceiling so a 17-year-old can get into the bathtub, or services at a hospital school so the child can attend on a daily basis and live with his family and not at the school. She learned when she was a young mother advocating for her son that she didn’t

continued next page

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get anywhere by being angry with people and making demands. Now she politely smiles, states her expectations, expects that people will cooperate, and finds that they do. Kathy believes that “if you give people the opportunity to do the right thing, they usually will”.

She believes that HMEA provides much support to her in her balance between personal and professional demands. Her children attended one of the first inclusion schools in the country. Since the school principal was blind, he truly understood the word disability. Kathy says that’s what it’s like at HMEA. You don’t have to explain

“disability”. Some days, she said, you just can’t go to work because school has been cancelled and you have to be at home with your son. No one has ever told her she must work a specific schedule. She gets her job done, and works the hours that are best for her (often that means early in the morning, or late at night). HMEA provides the schedule flexibility so Kathy can balance her priorities, and Kathy in turn works flexible hours in order to get her job done well. As she stated, “that’s great for somebody in my position.”

*Kathy was interviewed by **Karen Slowick**, Chair of the Diversity Committee. ◀*