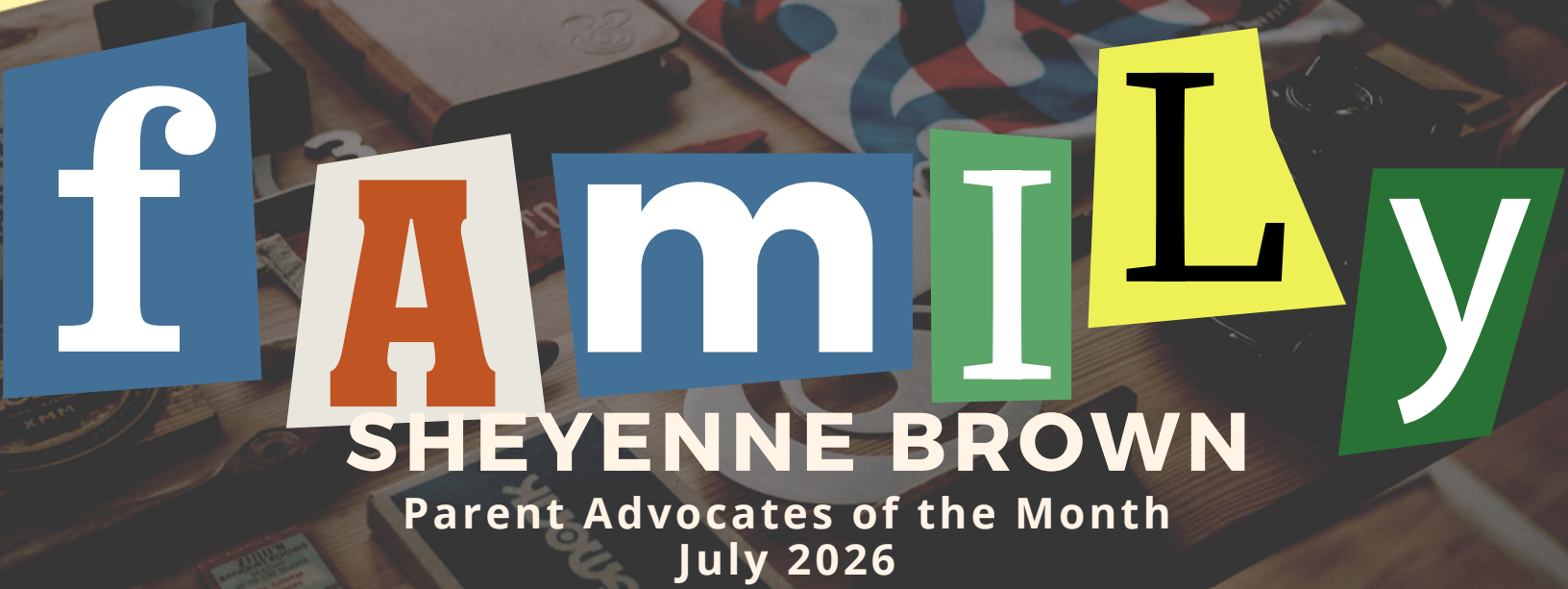




SHEYENNE BROWN

Parent Advocates of the Month
July 2026

WHAT MADE YOU ADVOCATE FOR YOUR CHILD'S EDUCATION?

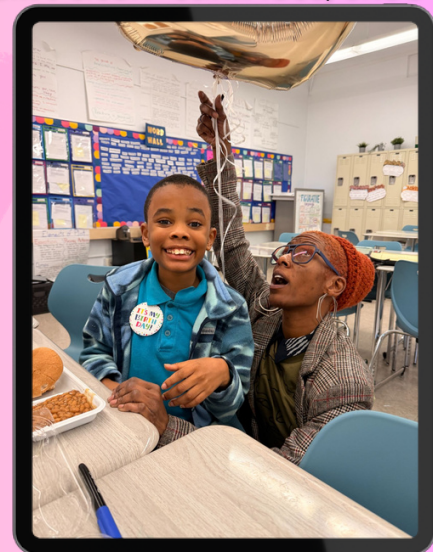
Picture it. Planet Earth, 2020. One of the first years we'd all been forced to sit with ourselves and families for longer than many of us ever had. I had always been a relatively active parent in my children's education, but I discovered that didn't mean I understood their learning. the catalyst to start getting courageous enough to start digging through the weeds. The catalyst to start getting courageous enough to start digging through the weeds was my later-in-life ADHD diagnosis and hitting professional roadblocks I couldn't goal set my way through. Could be projection, but once I saw parallels between our experiences, I couldn't unsee them. Cullen would perform well sometimes, but not others without the faintest clue as to why; He was selectively mute and being misread as incapable; I was always attending IEP meetings that spoke so highly of Cullen as a likeable, obedient child, but also not progressing in his learning. Cullen, like me, wasn't a squeaky enough of a wheel, and so I started squeaking for him.



WHAT IS THE BEST WAY TO EDUCATE YOURSELF ABOUT SPECIAL EDUCATION AND RELATED SERVICES?

Eat the elephant one bite at a time, because there's so much to try to keep a pulse on that it's overwhelming. Chat GPT, Gemini or other AI platforms have been critical because I can input really dense resources (like convoluted IEPs, the PRISE handbook, search the web for NJ state laws etc) and prompt it to break things down in a way that suits my learning style best, and that is what's really what has imbued a feeling of confidence in me that powers me to speak to speak even when my voice is shaking. Never forget that the people you're collaborating with are professionals who have committed to one of the toughest crafts that yields the least rewards. I find that when I ask questions of them that show I'm interested in their expertise, they are generous.

Oh, and I wasn't sure if this needed stating, but please get yourself an Adara Heilmann in your corner! I didn't find Arc until recently, and everytime I come with an IEP planning induced "something in the milk ain't clean" stink face, she's there with the proverbial sage. I got so many hours of my life back thanks to a handful of conversations and email exchanges. Validation and thought partnership are underrated necessities of this journey, and I didn't realize how much I needed it until I found Arc.





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WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE OTHER FAMILIES ADVOCATING FOR THEIR CHILD'S RIGHTS IN SPECIAL EDUCATION?

Firstly, you have to have unshakeable faith that your child's cognitive/social development is evidence of a super power. As an ADHD-addled parent of a child with Au-ADHD, I've adopted the POV that neurodivergent people are actually real life X-Men, who are evolving in order to save the world. You are Charles Xavier (who may need to have a Magneto on your time just in case!) Having that conviction has helped me build strong emotional infrastructures with teachers and administrators, because when you build trust, they will pull the curtain back and get really transparent with you. Be courageous enough to confront any ways you've contributed to the dysfunction (if applicable), and patient enough to ask questions until you're given answers that make sense. If your child receives outside services, or has had great providers at some point in their lives, tap those people for guidance if there are still gaps. It can be difficult some days, but I also try to assume best intentions or come from a place of curiosity because no matter how inefficient or uncollaborative the process may become, it's still all in service of and should be centered around your human.

Get everything in writing. If it's said in person or over the phone, capture it in an email or rolling agenda document. Keep emailing. Keep calling. Keep rejecting until you deem things acceptable. And above all else: demand specificity and metrics. Learning is a science and that means there has to be data that offers the necessary qualitative and quantitative information necessary to plot your child's course. Don't accept casual silence or "kind of, sort of" what you asked for. Lastly, be agile about what success looks like; you have to be ready for things to not work out immediately or how you envisioned. Kids are resilient and now is the time to "f around and find out," like the true scientist you are. :)

WHAT DOES BEING YOUR CHILD'S BEST ADVOCATE MEAN TO YOU?



Being my sons' best advocate means "killing my darlings" and "standing on business," sometimes simultaneously. It means I have to be the leader, even when I feel ill-equipped, and remain teachable. It means protecting my son from feelings of inadequacy, negative self-talk and a lifetime of questioning "why or why not me?" I had my children during a dreamy time in American history, filled with inclusivity, "change we could believe in" and hope, but the world I'll someday have to leave them to is no longer that. I feel it's my job to make sure they take up space, making the world move around them just as much as they'll be expected to move around it.

