Meet the CFC 15 Parent Liaisons: Juli Thornton, Melissa Ball, Julia Bartczak, Karen Principato, and Kelli Coleman *(from left to right).*

Juli Thornton – Juli is a service coordinator at CFC 15 since 2008 and a Parent Liaison since 2017. She is a licensed social worker and has previously worked as a police department social worker. Juli was introduced to the Early Intervention Program when her son Luke was 9 months old. His pediatrician referred him for an evaluation because he had noticed concerns with Luke's reflexes, and he was not sitting up. After being evaluated, Luke was determined to be functioning at a 3- month-old level and he qualified for Developmental Therapy, Speech Therapy, Physical Therapy, and Occupational therapy services. At that time, Early Intervention services were administered through Easter Seals and the program looked much different than it does today. Luke received all services in a clinic setting rather than in the home, requiring Juli to drive Luke to his many appointments each week.

Luke received Early Intervention supports from age one to three years old. Luke never received a specific diagnosis although Juli and her family took Luke to see many neurologists, specialists, and geneticists looking for answers. At the time she felt that if she just knew what his diagnosis was, then they could know how to help him. After the geneticist told her that there was nowhere else to go to find specific answers regarding his delays, she was able to let go of looking for answers and focus on doing all she could to help meet Luke's needs. She credits much of Luke's progress to the information she learned about child development from Luke's therapists and then being able to work with him at home in their daily routines using all that she was learning from his therapists.

Juli's advice for families in Early Intervention is that they are part of the team with their child's therapists and to work with them to help parents understand how they can help their child's development. She also encourages families to listen to your gut regarding your child's needs because parents are the experts on their children. Additionally, if your child is given a label or a diagnosis, know that labels can be fluid and change over time as your child grows and develops. She shared that there are many unknowns and parents do not have a crystal ball to know what will occur as their child grows, but what we as parents can focus on is what is happening with our child today and focus our energies there.

When Luke turned three years old, he was successfully transitioned to the Early Childhood program at her local school district. Her journey continued there and she and Luke experienced challenges and successes during his school years. Juli states that she always viewed herself as part of the educational team and went into every IEP meeting with the mindset that the school was working together with her and had Luke's best interest in mind. Juli wants parents to know that their child's past educational diagnosis or history does not stay with the child, and that the school's plan focuses on what is needed at that time and can change from year to year.

Melissa Ball - Melissa is a parent of a child who received Early Intervention Services and she is also a Service Coordinator who has worked at CFC #15 since 2008. Melissa's daughter Josie was born with Hypoplastic Left Heart Syndrome, meaning the left side of her heart was extremely underdeveloped.

After her birth, Josie had four open heart surgeries and many hospitalizations. When Josie was 15 months old Melissa contacted the Early Intervention program and Josie qualified for services due to a speech delay. However, when Josie was almost 3 years old she had two strokes that greatly impacted her development. After her strokes, Josie had to re-learn many developmental skills such as how to sit up, walk, and feed herself. Through EI, Josie began meeting with a developmental therapist, a physical therapist, and an occupational therapist, in addition to the speech services she had been receiving. When Josie turned three years old, she transitioned into the preschool program at her local school district and continued to receive these services in school. During Josie's time in Early Intervention Melissa said that she asked many questions of her therapists and tried to participate in Josie's therapy sessions so that she was able to work with Josie throughout the week. She states that she appreciated the in home services that she received while Josie was in EI and the fact that therapists communicated with her on a regular basis about the services they provided, especially after Josie started going to daycare and Melissa was unable to be at the therapy sessions.

Melissa's advice for families in Early Intervention is to always ask questions and advocate for your child. She states that service coordinators and therapists are there to help you with your child's development so no question is ever silly. She describes her role as a parent liaison as helping families to find the support and services that work for them. She realizes that all families are on their own journey and she wants to meet families where they are.

Julia Bartczak - Julia is a service coordinator at CFC 15 and has worked in this role since April 2013. Julia was introduced to Early Intervention in 2010 shortly after the birth of her son Bryce. During her pregnancy with Bryce Julia had a level 2 ultrasound with inconclusive results, and she knew there was a possibility her child may have a diagnosis. Bryce was born at 35 weeks and spent 12 days in the NICU. It was when he was in the NICU that Julia learned of his Down Syndrome diagnosis. She was referred to Early Intervention from the hospital and was contacted by a service coordinator in the Early Intervention program shortly after.

Due to his diagnosis Bryce automatically qualified for the Early Intervention Program. He was evaluated by a Developmental Therapist, a Speech Therapist, a Physical Therapist, and an Occupational Therapist and it was determined that he was within normal developmental limits. At that time Bryce did not need ongoing therapy and received service coordination only. He was then re-evaluated for the program several months later and qualified for Physical Therapy and began working with a Physical Therapist. Julia and the EI team eventually added Speech Therapy for feeding concerns, then Occupational Therapy and Developmental Therapy. Julia states that she loved her EI therapists and they became like family, however her EI journey was not without some bumps. She did not connect with one of her therapists and also had a service coordinator that was not a good fit for her, so she was able to be connected with a different therapist and service coordinator. She states that she is still in contact with several of Bryce's therapists and considers them friends to this day.

Juila's advice for families in Early Intervention is to ask questions. Often the language used by the Early Intervention team can be confusing and there are many acronyms used in EI (Early Intervention) so ask your EI team about anything you are unsure of. Also, she recommends families follow the strategies

given by the therapists. The gains made in EI are so much greater for their child when the family is able to use strategies therapists show them during their weekly visits.

When Julia's son Bryce turned three years old, he was successfully transitioned to the Early Childhood program at her local school district. However, their challenges did not end there. Four months later Bryce stopped walking and shortly after he was diagnosed with leukemia. He immediately began treatment and spent the next two and a half years battling his cancer diagnosis. Bryce's cancer is currently in remission and he has been given a clean bill of health by his doctors.

Karen Principato - Karen is a parent of a child who received Early Intervention Services and she is also a Service Coordinator who has worked at CFC #15 since 2008. Karen was introduced to the Early Intervention program in the hospital after giving birth to her daughter Olivia. Olivia was an EI automatic qualifier due to prematurity and low birth weight, she was born at 24 weeks and weighed 1lb 5oz. Karen states that Olivia was in the hospital NICU for the first three months after she was born and came home on oxygen and an apnea monitor. Karen contacted the Child and Family Connections office when Olivia was about 6 months old to have her evaluated. At that time Olivia was diagnosed with torticollis and plagiocephaly, and she began wearing a helmet and receiving physical therapy. During her time in EI Olivia received developmental, occupational, physical, and speech therapy. Karen states that she appreciated all that she learned while part of the EI program. The therapists who worked with her helped her learn how to play with Olivia to encourage her learning and development. She also appreciated the therapists educating her on child development. Due to her time in EI, Olivia achieved age appropriate skills before her third birthday and transitioned into the local school district preschool program.

Karen's advice for families in Early Intervention is to focus on what your concerns are for your child and address these concerns with your therapists. She feels it is important to help empower families to trust themselves and address concerns they may have with therapists. She also encourages families to learn about their options after Early Intervention by going through the process of transitioning to their school district.

Kelli Coleman – Kelli has worked in Early Intervention as a service coordinator since 2002. Kelli worked in EI when her son Maddox was born in April 2007. When he was 27 months old, she decided to have him evaluated for speech concerns because she was concerned that he was difficult to understand and felt like she was constantly "translating" his speech for others. Maddox did qualify for EI due to his speech concerns, and he began receiving speech therapy. Due to his articulation issues, his speech therapist recommended that he have a hearing evaluation and it was determined that Maddox had fluid in his ears and he wasn't hearing properly. Once this was determined, he had tubes put in his ears and made great progress! At age 3 Maddox was transitioned to his local school district where he received walk-in speech services.

Some advice Kelli likes to share with parents who have children in EI is to be your child's advocate and use your therapists as a resource. Be honest about what strategies are working or not working with your child. She also suggests trying not to compare your child with other children his or her age because

each child makes progress at his or her own speed. Kelli states that the transition process from EI to her school district when Maddox was three was intimidating for her. She recommends to parents to always explore the transition options with the school district by having your child evaluated by the school, visiting the school, speaking with the people in charge of the program at your school, and using that time to get your questions answered. In addition, she states it is important to explore community preschool programs and other community options such as outpatient clinics as the local school district is not the only option available at age three. Sometimes, a combination of school services and community supports are a great option for children to continue their development.