

ROGER DIEHL GOES TO WASHINGTON

By Sita Diehl

My 17-year-old son, Roger, has been fascinated with current events for many years, discussing public policy issues with family and anyone else who would listen. Lest you think he is simply a news junky, he has many other interests, particularly biochemistry. Taking a lively interest in his own treatment, Roger reads material I bring home from my work as Executive Director of National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) Tennessee and does his own research online. He is a high school senior, president of the honor society, graduating second in his class in a challenging academic program.

First diagnosed with PDD-NOS at the age of three, Roger is now diagnosed with Aspergers Syndrome, depression and ADD. **Jeri Fitzpatrick, M.D.**, Roger's psychiatrist, has consistently involved him in decisions about his own treatment resulting in his sense of empowerment and therapeutic alliance. There have been rough years, but early intervention and consistent, excellent care have contributed to Roger's current well-being.

When NAMI notified us of the opportunity to participate in AACAP Advocacy Day, we jumped at the chance to participate in the process. Characteristically, Roger did his homework. He read the talking points sheets provided by the AACAP, but then looked up the actual bills online and described the technical aspects to me during our flight to Washington. He had researched pro and con arguments and had opinions of his own. He was particularly struck with the contrast between rhetoric and actual stipulations of the legislation.

AACAP treated us as honored guests. We got to meet Congressman Patrick Kennedy at a legislative reception and the AACAP folks prepared us with information at a legislative briefing in the morning. Accompanied by **Dr. Jack Naftel**, we visited the Tennessee Congressional delegation. Because my husband works for the federal government, we have enjoyed mental health parity since the late 1990s, perhaps one of the keys to Roger's well-being. We were able to make the case that parity promotes early intervention, helping the child maintain resiliency and minimizing the need for costly emergency care. Legislators were amused and impressed to see how well Roger knew the legislation, even the technical bits.

Tired and happy, we returned to the hotel for debriefing. There was a general sense that our collaboration as clinicians, parents and youth was indeed an effective strategy to inform policy makers of the need for good mental health policy and adequate resources. On the flight home, Roger stated how much he enjoyed the experience. We're going back this year. An advocate is born!



Sita Diehl, Rep. Jim Cooper (D-Tenn), Roger Diehl, and Cathy Fuchs, M.D. Sita and her son Roger, are members of NAMI and participated in AACAP Hill Day in 2007.

