



Wisconsin Board for People with Developmental Disabilities

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Did we just do this? That thought has crossed my mind. Several times during the Toys for Tots Toddler of the Year competition. My husband and I entered a nationwide toddler competition and let our 7-year-old and 3-year-old run the show, coaching them along the way. My name is Amanda Henning, and I am an advocate and a graduate of BPDD's Partners in Policymaking program and the Youth Leadership Forum (YLF).

Our story targets former and future Partners, as well as those with children. Our goal was simple. We were going to do this competition and teach our children about advocacy, marketing, fundraising goals, the voting process, the power of networking, and helping others. It all started when I was putting together a presentation for the Wisconsin Youth Leadership Forum (WI YLF), which helps high school students with disabilities learn to become advocates and develop leadership skills they can apply in their everyday lives and communities. My daughter usually assists me every year, and she asked me, "What is advocacy?" It got me thinking. She's getting old enough to realize what advocacy is all about. So, my thought was we should probably teach her what advocacy can do in her everyday life. While I was finishing up my presentation, I was scrolling through Facebook and came across an ad for Toddler of the Year. It was the fundraiser for Toys for Tots hosted by Colossal and Hasbro. I thought this would be perfect for Charlotte and our son Henry, who is three. So, we ended up signing up Henry, and 3 weeks later I received an email saying that Henry was nominated to continue in the competition, and so it began.

Before we move on any further, we need to go through what Toddler of the Year is all about and the rules, as well as how each level breaks down, because that's the tricky part about this whole thing: trying to get to the next level. Toddler of the Year is a competition to find the next toddler to be the face of a nationwide ad campaign for Toys for Tots during the holiday season. The winner receives \$25,000 and will be a part of the Hollywood Christmas parade, which sounds like a great incentive (at least for my kids). Now here's the kicker: because so many kids are signing up for this, they have to split the kids into many groups of 40. From there, they have to make it to the Top 2 in each group. The Top 1 moves on to the quarterfinals and goes up against the other group of winners. Those who finished 2nd in their group have 2 days to get as many votes as they can to be number 1 and move on. From there, it goes through 2 more rounds of voting before the finals. Oh boy, what were we thinking? Our goal was simple. Let's see how much money we can raise. Also, and this

is a big one, to make sure that we were having fun. We went into this together as a family. Charlotte was the campaign manager; my husband, Jake, and I were in charge of making sure everything got done and coaching them through the process. Henry got to play a role in the filming as well as picking pictures for his profile page and for the media flyers.

We started off small. Just putting feelers out there. Going on Facebook, making short videos and flyers, and talking to friends and family, and it worked. We had such an amazing turnout of support, which in turn showed in his performance in the voting. He stayed consistent through the first two rounds with just friends and family. Then it became challenging. Colossal and Hasbro added a twist to the final rounds. They wanted us to reach out to local newspapers and the media, including radio. Unfortunately, I have not done this for quite some time and felt out of my element.

At this point, I ended up using a lot of my Partners in Policymaking and networking skills to help coach Charlotte through this stage of the fundraiser. This was an awesome experience for her, seeing that even Daddy and Mama needed to ask for help. This also was a wonderful teaching experience for Charlotte about making friends and using those friends to help you in a positive way. Charlotte and I made a list of all the local newspapers and media outlets we could find. We started local by making our first three pitches, and then the local newspaper called us, saying they wanted to run our story the next day. Our first-ever newspaper article made the front page with a full-color picture. Very exciting. Then the donations started coming in strong; we were finally getting public votes. Votes from people we didn't know. He went from \$110 to over \$260 just after the newspaper came out, bumping him into third place in his group. The newspaper article reached all of Washington County. As Henry puts it, "it was beautiful." Henry and Charlotte's campaign got them both into the group finals, which became fierce competition. At this point, Henry had raised \$620 going into the group finals. His goal was to raise \$1,400.

The group finals were a brutal competition. Lots of back-and-forth was going on, and the hard part was that we were running out of time and needed to get the public votes. We tried a lot of different media avenues: radio, news, newspapers, magazines, but no bites. So, we talked about different strategies for marketing and networking. Charlotte came up with a brilliant idea of selling lemonade and creating a QR code for folks to donate money. We had fairgoers going down the road of our subdivision, and we worked on our door-to-door campaigning. Charlotte came up with a flyer, and we added the QR code and the website for neighbors to use. She also came up with the idea of putting flyers in places she and Henry like to go, which was brilliant. We flooded the area with 'Vote for Henry' signs and did all that we could but ended up in second place in the group finals.

To be honest, I am very proud of our family overall. We turned a fundraising event into a learning experience for all of us. I learned some new technology, like QR Codes and short videos, and wrote pitches to networks and newspapers, and the kids learned how to become little advocates. Our children now express themselves more and are advocating for themselves instead of saying “I don’t know”. All in all, they raised \$1,150 for Toys for Tots and made it through six rounds of voting. We had a very eventful summer, and we gave the kids the opportunity to learn something new.

The Henning Family

Jake, Amanda, Charlotte, and Henry