



October 11, 2009

## Woman's advocacy for special-needs kids pushes her to law school

*Shawn Cohen*

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HAWTHORNE - Adrienne Arkontaky knew something was wrong when she'd look into her baby daughter's eyes and get no visual recognition.

The girl, Jordan, also couldn't crawl, sit up or verbalize.

"We realized there was definitely some neurological problem," said the Hawthorne mother, who brought her child to the first of many specialists.

Doctors diagnosed Jordan with cerebral palsy, cortical blindness, a seizure disorder and profound mental retardation.

"It was devastating," said Arkontaky, 49. "This was a whole new world. We didn't know what to do or who to turn to."

That was 17 years ago. At the time, Arkontaky, whose husband, Peter, is an operating engineer, was working at home on a T-shirt business, raising her then-two children with assistance from a nurse.

She reached out to the John A. Coleman School in White Plains, which sent a mobile unit that helped arrange therapies for Jordan at home and provided everything from medical guidance to assistance building a chair so Jordan could sit up.

A case coordinator helped navigate various county and local services to get Jordan the assistance she needed.

"They were really such a source of support that it gave us hope that there was light at the end of the tunnel, that we could get through this," she said.

Arkontaky was so grateful, felt so empowered and learned so much from the experience that she decided to help others in her situation. First, she became a service coordinator for Family Connection in Valhalla, given a caseload of 20 families with disabilities.

"I absolutely loved it," she said. "We would help find programs for the children, make sure they had all the equipment they needed, would visit the families. Anything they needed, I would help them with."

It was during this period that she gave birth to her third daughter, Jenna.

"I really wanted to do something more," she said of her occupation.

She was 38.

"I would always say to people that I was having this mid-life crisis and should have gone to law school," she said. "My friends would say to me, 'You're so good at navigating the system and fighting for the rights of children, stop talking about it and just go to law school.'"

With her husband's blessing, she enrolled at Pace Law School in White Plains in 1999.

Four years later, she graduated. Two years after that, she joined the firm Littman Krooks, working on special needs planning, special education advocacy and guardianship for families of children with disabilities.

"She has helped hundreds of families in the region access services to make the quality of their children's lives better," said Bernie Krooks, managing partner of the firm, which has an office in White Plains. "Many clients have told us that one thing that differentiates Adrienne from other lawyers is her willingness to listen and understand and empathize with clients' concerns prior to dispensing legal advice. She does whatever it takes to get the job done."

Client Christopher Cavallaro credits her with helping get a school district to provide specialized education services for his niece with learning challenges.

"The district was less than forthcoming," he said. "At the end of the day, with Adrienne's good work, they came to the table. She was great in working through the system to get them to finally give the child what was needed."

Arkontaky is also active in charitable work, serves as a trustee at the Coleman School and is on the board of directors of Family Ties, an organization serving relatives of loved ones with mental illness. She can also often be seen, with her three daughters, participating in walks and fundraisers that help these families.

Jordan is a student at the Center for Discovery in Harris, N.Y.

"I pinch myself that I get to do this for a living," Arkontaky said. "For me to be able to help other families with the struggles we have faced, this is my dream in life."

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Submitted by the John A. Coleman School  
Adrienne J. Arkontaky of Hawthorne.

# A voice for kids with special needs

Shawn Cohen

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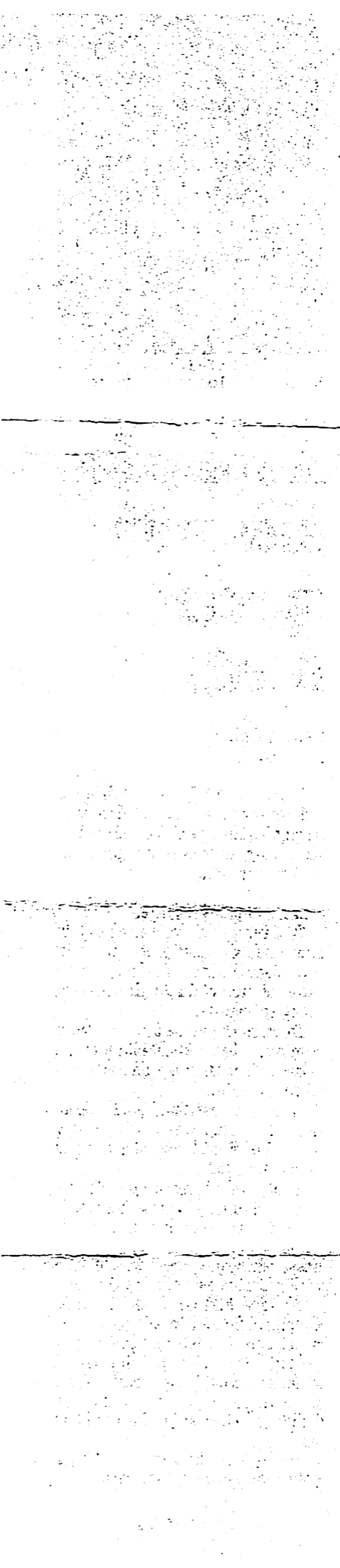
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# PORTRAIT: Woman helps families access needed services

CONTINUED FROM 1D

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