



## Parents Opening Doors

Parents Opening Doors (Padres Abriendo Puertas) is a community-based, grass roots organization composed of Latino parents of children, youth, and adults with disabilities. We were started in 1991 by a group of Latino parents of children with disabilities who were concerned about barriers and exclusion of their children from educational opportunities in the Hartford, Connecticut school system. We are a state-wide organization with local programs in Hartford, Waterbury, New Haven, and Lower Fairfield County. In each of these settings, we are in the process of establishing local parent advisory groups and local Latino Disabilities Resource Centers.

The mission of PAP is to ensure the human, civil, and educational rights and total community inclusion of Latino children and families with disabilities and mental health challenges. We are guided by the grass-roots participation and decision-making at all levels of the organizations. Our major goals are to empower parents, youth, and adults to achieve positions of leadership in their community in order to become self-advocates and to advocate for system change in their local schools and in their community.

One of the most successful programs of PAP is the Youth Empowerment Leadership Program (YELP), the goals of which are to enhance the empowerment and leadership skills of Latino youth in order to self-advocate for system change, which will in turn enhance inclusion and independence in all areas of their lives. This program was sponsor for the DDC Council (Developmental Disabilities Council), and after two years it became to be an After School Program sponsored by the city of Hartford. This program is for students with and without disabilities from middle and high schools between the ages of 12 and 18.

During the YELP program, students have the opportunity to participate in workshops on self-esteem, life skills, values, special education rights, computer labs, and using community resources available for people with disabilities. In addition, students participate in field trips, such as going to the Natural History Museum in New

York or the Dinosaur State Park in Rocky Hill, Connecticut, among others.

YELP students participated in developing a newsletter with information about the YELP program activities, such as health, special education, services for the family, and much more. This year, with the participation of 60 youth, we celebrated the 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual Students Fair held in a recreation park in the city of Hartford. It was a one-day event where students participated at workshops with the Bureau of Vocational Rehabilitation Services. They had the opportunity to meet other students and to have fun doing sports, arts and crafts, food, music, and many more activities.

*As a program coordinator for the PAP After School Program, **Betzaida Castro**'s role is to integrate students with disabilities and students without disabilities in recreational and educational activities. One of her greatest satisfactions was watching the participants advocate for themselves by creating their own newsletter.*