Tracy Barber, one of the early mentors

Phil Pickens has an award named after him, but not many people these days remember the man. Phil Pickens is remembered every year by the Georgia Parent Mentor Partnership because he is the founder. But sadly, since his death, nearly a decade ago, there are few mentors working with the GaPMP today who were there during the early days.

Tracy Barber, who joined the partnership the second year of it’s forming in 2003, remembers Phil Pickens and, the other person who helped found it, Patti Solomon, who retired from her post as Family Engagement Specialist, at the Georgia Department of Education, in 2012.

Barber’s experiences are a testament to what the Georgia Parent Mentor Partnership is capable of. “In July 2004 I went to my first Parent Mentor Conference. I found myself in a room full of strangers. I hadn’t gone to college, I was just a mother with a child with disabilities from south Georgia,” Barber remembered. She started in a place where many parents start. Actually, Barber reflected on how resistant she was to even allowing her child to receive services. “I refused to sign the consent,” she said. “Can you imagine?”

But, step by step, with the help of Sandy Malone, who was the director of special education services in Seminole County at the time, Barber began to see how her involvement in her son Trey’s education was vital to his success. When Malone asked her if she would be interested in becoming a parent mentor, she boldly accepted the offer.

Barber began to understand the importance and, the possibilities of this new program. “I was in that meeting and I realized that everyone in the room had a child with a disability,” she said.

A lot of that had to do with the genius of the partnership’s founders. Phil Pickens’ had the ability to get school districts on board. Patti Solomon knew how to get the parents on board. Barber said, “They treated me as if they already knew me. They made me feel welcome in a situation where I felt out of place at first. They asked about my child. They acknowleged me.”

They were training her how to be a mentor and she didn’t even know it.

When she went back to her home system she began using the tools she herself experienced as a participant in the conference for the parents in her district. She began having conversations with her director about how parents feel when they come to an IEP meeting. Some of the earliest initiatives Barber helped begin in Seminole County was an effort to make IEP meetings more parent friendly by making sure that staff use the full term rather than acronyms. She explained the importance of saying positive things about a child, rather than focusing on weaknesses. She also started a clothes closet offering professional clothes for job interviews and important meetings.

It wasn’t easy. Barber said she wasn’t taken very seriously at first. There was a “Who is this person?” vibe. But, Malone, as the director, took the lead and helped staff understand the purpose, and, ultimately the value of Barber’s position and role. Over time, Barber discovered she became a part of the district team and her opinions and ideas were heard.

Changes happened elsewhere in her life. Unfortunately, Trey died unexpectedly and the Partnership was there to help Barber pick up the pieces of her life. “Phil and Patti were there for me always.” She went to school and got her bachelor’s degree in Human Service Management. She started serving in more and more leadership roles. She served as Chair of the Georgia Parent Mentor Leadership Council. She spearheaded formation of the C.A.F.E. (Circles of Adults Focused on Education) in Seminole, and today, she works for the Georgia Department of Education as the C.A.F.E. coach.

On April 15, 2018, Ms. Barber became Mrs. Jones when she enters into her next important partnership with Capt. Martin Jones. She also took a new position in 2018 with Sumter County Schools as the Title I Family Engagement Coordinator.