



## Massachusetts Down Syndrome Congress

July 9, 2008

NOMINEE: Morning Travelers: Sharon Randall, Maura Russo, and Charlotte Gray

Dear Morning Travelers,

On behalf of the Massachusetts Down Syndrome Congress Board of Directors, I would like to thank you for all that you do on behalf of so many children with Down syndrome and their families. You were recently nominated for the *Allen C. Crocker Award of Excellence* by Kathy Norton, and while the MDSC selected another nominee, we were very moved and inspired by your efforts.

Choosing the award recipient for the Allen C. Crocker Award was extremely difficult as there were several worthy candidates. Your nomination included impressive testimonials from many people whose lives have been touched by the Morning Travelers and it is obvious how important your group is to many families. The support that you offer to your members as well as your continuous support and contributions to the MDSC are greatly appreciated.

I thought you would enjoy reading a copy of the nomination submitted by Kathy Norton, along with the wonderful statements of many others.

I hope you will be joining us on Friday evening to celebrate all of the contributions made through the years by so many dedicated people like you and the Morning Travelers.

Thank you again for all that you do.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Suzanne B. Shea".

Suzanne Shea  
Chair, MDSC Nominating Committee

cc: Kathy Norton

enclosure

MDSC Crocker Award Nominations 2008



## Massachusetts Down Syndrome Congress

### **CROCKER – Morning Travelers Group**

My Information:

Kathy Norton  
97 Forge Village Road  
Westford Massachusetts 01886  
978.273.8994  
[HealyNorton@yahoo.com](mailto:HealyNorton@yahoo.com)

Who I'm Nominating:

Morning Travelers: Sharon Randall, Maura Russo, and Charlotte Gray  
c/o Sharon Randall, 29 White Birch Lane  
North Andover Massachusetts 01845  
978.974.0191  
[MorningTravelers@yahoo.com](mailto:MorningTravelers@yahoo.com)

I would like to nominate Sharon Randall, Maura Russo, and Charlotte Gray for the Allen C. Crocker Award of Excellence in recognition of their efforts in founding and sustaining the Morning Travelers playgroup. Sharon, Maura, and Charlotte founded Morning Travelers in 2003. The three moms met at a regional parents group and realized that as the parents of infants, their needs were different than those of the other parents in the support group whose children were significantly older. They decided to meet for play dates for their children and hoped to attract other families of infants. They named their fledgling group Morning Travelers in recognition of the fact that they were just starting out on their journey. There is a well-known quote from the movie Field of Dreams, "if you build it, they will come". Sharon, Maura, and Charlotte have built "it", and every month families, from more than 40 communities in Massachusetts and New Hampshire, have come, and come, and come. (At April's playgroup, Morning Travelers welcomed three new members, the youngest just 6-weeks old.)

The Morning Travelers playgroup meets once a month in North Andover, MA. Playgroup is a family affair regularly attended by moms, dads, siblings, grandparents, and family friends. The young ones gather in the nursery, the older kids flock to the "craft room" and some just enjoy running back and forth between rooms. A favorite event is the December playgroup with special guest visitor from the North Pole. A Halloween party in October was such a hit that it's sure to become an annual event. The focus is always on FRIENDSHIP - for children, their siblings, and their families

My daughter Meg was born in September 2005. After the initial shock of hearing her diagnosis, my first thought was that she would not have a date for her high school prom. It broke my heart. A newborn's world is supposed to be full of possibilities; Meg was only hours old and I could only hear doors closing. I felt so lonely and isolated. For weeks, I stared at my beautiful daughter and worried about the unknown. We learned about Morning Travelers and brought Meg to playgroup when she was 6 weeks old. We were overwhelmed by the warm, welcoming spirit of the group. We have missed only one playgroup since then. It is a highlight on our family calendar. At a Parents Night Out shortly after that first playgroup, we talked about our thoughts and fears. I shared my fear that Meg wouldn't have a prom date. Sharon looked me straight in the eye and said "don't kid yourself; that's what we're here for." From that moment, I knew what a special group I had found. I no longer worry about Meg's prom date. I know that as Meg celebrates



## Massachusetts Down Syndrome Congress

that important milestone, I will be celebrating with my Morning Travelers family.

Sharon, Maura, and Charlotte have said that their objective in forming Morning Travelers was to provide a fun and social community of friends for their children and families. They have done that, and so much more. What follows are just a few statements from Morning Traveler families indicating their support for this nomination.

Every time I go (to playgroup) I meet new people and families. It's amazing how much we can share information with each other in such a short period of time. I travel 50 miles to attend; the long trip is certainly worth it. This is an incredible group of women who are making a real difference in the lives of families with a child who has Down syndrome. –**Inga Wronski**

What a comfort it is to know there is a group of people who understand the ups and downs of raising a child with Down syndrome. Sharon, Charlotte and Maura have created this incredible community of people that we couldn't do without (although it's very hard for us to get to the playgroups.) Knowing any one of them is just a phone call or email away, is so reassuring. –**Debbie Christianson**

My son Nate was diagnosed with Down syndrome prenatally at 17 weeks. I reached out to Morning Travelers immediately. Sharon, Charlotte and Maura all responded to me within 30 minutes of my phone call. That day and in the months leading up to Nate's birth, they shared their experiences of raising a child with Downs, offered endless support and provided me with optimism for our future with Nate. I honestly don't know how I would have made it through the prenatal diagnosis without them. Now that Nate is fully recovered from his heart surgery, we've been actively involved in the monthly playgroup sponsored by Morning Travelers. What an amazing, spirit-filled community these three women have built. It's wonderful that we have a place to bring our son where he can just be Nate and not Nate with Down syndrome. My husband and I have never felt alone in this journey thanks to Morning Travelers. –**Michelle Hoening**

Morning Travelers has been a place where I have felt supported and comfortable. It is a place to meet people who are dealing with the same struggles as well as the same victories. Sharon, Maura and Charlotte specifically are like amazing hostesses who connect you with others who have great things in common. It is really a blessing for me and I am so thankful for those women who have also become great friends. –**Nancy Thompson**

I am the mother of a 5 year old with Down syndrome. It has been a wonderful thing to go to Morning Travelers each month to be with other parents who are "going through the same thing" I am. Sharon, Maura, and Charlotte are my friends, and I feel like they are also my anchors. They are excellent listeners and are very friendly and welcoming. It is always wonderful to be near to them. I don't think I can say more, other than my son and I are truly blessed by these women! –**Heather LaBudde**

In a time of uncertainty, fear, and uncontrollable emotions I attended a Morning Travelers playgroup. This group welcomes families with open arms and helps to sort out all of the unknown that comes with having a young child with Down syndrome. These 3 women are truly inspirational in their desire to help other families understand and believe that life for our kids will be OK and that we will have a huge group of friends to turn to, always. The work that they put into this group is amazing and we are lucky to have them in our lives. –**Andrea Hanson**

Morning Travelers is a wonderful gathering for both the kids and parents. It is a time for the kids to play with others while parents share their experiences. It is just a great meeting for getting ideas to help your kids on life's journey and find support. Sharon, Charlotte, and Maura provide a wonderful



## Massachusetts Down Syndrome Congress

service. They give so much of themselves; playgroup is something we all look forward to each month.

–**Tim Wickens**

It came as a total surprise when our daughter, Harper Libby, was diagnosed with Down syndrome. After a very traumatic birth and first few years of major surgeries and scary health concerns, my husband and I really felt the need to meet and connect with other parents who had experience with Down syndrome. We wanted Harper to get a chance to meet and play with other children her age who might share similar issues and stories. We tried to connect with other families, but there didn't seem to be much going on in our immediate area. I read about Morning Travelers in an issue of the MDSC newsletter and contacted them immediately. Every time we can make the Saturday playgroup, we always have such a great time and it is so nice to have finally gotten a chance to meet so many other families who have walked a similar path with their youngsters. Although the group meets in a location that is not too close to our home, we always try our best to make the trip and it is always worth it. We are greeted by name and we always feel right at home. Morning Travelers has been a godsend for our family. It is so nice to be amongst a group of people where you don't have to explain away certain behaviors, actions or physical issues/delays that are common to Down syndrome and we are so happy we have been able to connect with the Morning Travelers families. –**Maisie Hochella**

Our granddaughter, Maya, arrived suddenly two months early and we were told she had Down's syndrome. We flew to Boston immediately. All of us were confused, concerned and the going was very tough in those first weeks. Two days after we returned to our home in Florida a friend from the North Andover area sent me a newspaper article about Morning Travelers and suggested that I contact them. I emailed Sharon and that very day she replied. That was the beginning of our journey to understanding. On behalf of the Morning Travelers, Sharon led us in the direction we needed to take. She was so insightful and shared with us how to express our joy about our new granddaughter to her parents, how to offer help to them, how to be involved in Maya's life even though we live far away. Several visits later we had the opportunity to attend a Morning Travelers playgroup. What a pleasure; many happy little kids and parents who are so involved, willing to share and pay it forward! Morning Travelers reaches out to so many people with energy, caring and welcoming. It is a life ring when you need it most and a continuing place for sharing and growing together. –**Marge and Dom Gualtieri**

Morning Travelers has changed my family forever. We were fortunate enough to learn about the group very early on and started going when my son Eric was only 4 months old. I remember being greeted by Sharon and feeling so welcomed and more than anything UNDERSTOOD. The playgroup has allowed my family to meet wonderful friends and find support as we learn our way through different things in relation to Eric. More importantly, the group has given me the ability to begin to give back to others. It wasn't long ago that I was lost and confused. I still feel anxious, but now I am empowered with the feeling that I have a group that I can rely on. I cannot thank Sharon, Charlotte and Maura enough for forming a wonderful group and allowing all of us to meet. –**Maggy & Philip Godfroy**

My son was born with Down syndrome in February 2005; I felt overwhelmed and desperately lonely. Surrounded by family and friends who loved and supported us, I still felt like the only person in the world who had ever gone through this. Then a MDSC newsletter arrived with a story about Morning Travelers. I emailed them and within the hour I received a response inviting me to the next playgroup. I cannot say enough about Sharon, Charlotte, and Maura. These three women welcomed my family like old friends and made us feel like we were part of something truly special. That is the beauty of Morning Travelers! Sharon, Charlotte and Maura spend countless hours - not to mention personal resources - helping new families like mine celebrate the excellence of our children with Down syndrome. –**Kate Connors**



## Massachusetts Down Syndrome Congress

Morning Travelers has made a gigantic difference. In the beginning, I felt like all we did was meet with well-intended professionals who told us everything that would be wrong with our child. We were given books that bombarded us with all the challenges we would face. Morning Travelers is a place where everything is right. My daughter was 4 months old the first time we went. I was very nervous, not knowing what to expect. Everyone was so welcoming and the kids seemed fine to me! My journey of acceptance turned a corner that day - it was the first time I felt like it would be okay. And every time I go to playgroup, I get that reassurance again and again. At Morning Travelers, our children are celebrated, thanks to Sharon, Maura, and Charlotte for generously giving of their time and spirit to make it all happen. –**Randi Elkind**

After our daughter was born, Morning Travelers gave our family a sense of immediate and joyful belonging. Sharon, Maura, and Charlotte enveloped all of us and made concerted efforts to meet us and provide us with much needed guidance on resources, the educational path for our child within our hometown, and also introduced us to other families containing a member with Down syndrome. Sharon, Maura, and Charlotte are very warm, welcoming, knowledgeable and seemingly always available to greet the newest family entering our very special situation. We believe that Morning Travelers has, and will be for many years to come, an integral part of our lives, community and circle of friends for not only us as parents, but for our daughter and sons as well. We feel fortunate to have had such a wonderful network available to us and know that many families since us too have found tremendous comfort in its membership. –**Wendy Agudelo**

The Morning Travelers group is the only opportunity my family has to really connect with other families with Down syndrome family members. Sharon, Charlotte and Maura are so giving of their time, energy and compassion to welcome any family from across Massachusetts who wants to connect with this wonderful second family! –**Katherine Craven**

As the parents of a child with Down syndrome, we know first hand how important it is to connect with families in a similar situation. And that's why we feel very fortunate to benefit from the Morning Travelers group. The sharing of solutions to problems experienced by many families, access to information in a relaxed setting, inspiration for new parents to see first hand the positive development of children with Down syndrome, relationship-building experiences for children with Down syndrome, their siblings and parents, a community of friends...and more...are all a part of what the Morning Travelers group has brought to our lives. Not to mention it's fun and it's run by individuals who genuinely care about others. We are very grateful to the founders: Sharon, Charlotte, and Maura for creating such a worthwhile program. –**Joy and Roger Kruppa**

The Allen C. Crocker Award of Excellence is given in recognition of Dr. Crocker's many years of nurturing individuals with Down syndrome and their families through their life's journey. It is presented to a person or group that celebrates the excellence of persons with Down syndrome and significantly advances the Down syndrome movement. Sharon Randall, Maura Russo, and Charlotte Gray deserve to be recognized with this award. The group they have founded and nurtured, Morning Travelers provides families a place to celebrate the excellence of their new additions with Down syndrome. It provides a place of friendship and belonging and has become a sanctuary in a sometimes uncertain journey. While many are deserving of the Allen C. Crocker Award of Excellence, I can think of no other three women more inspiring and genuine. I thank you for considering them for this prestigious award.