Special Education Legal Fund Started to Help Families Navigate Special Ed

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The moment parents hear the word disability associated with their child, time stops.

Or so it seems.

But just as emotion saps their reserves, the challenges they face are just setting in and, in fact, time is flying. Parents do not have the luxury of taking time to process this overwhelming news. Instead, they have to adapt and learn and keep pace with the changes that come and the subsequent special education landscape they face.

Greenwich residents Ulrika Drinkall and Christine Lai both faced and fought those moments. They navigated the maze of special education that came with their children's' diagnoses, and they forged a friendship built on their shared passion and experience.

Together they are now launching the **Special Education Legal Fund**, or S.E.L.F., to help other families facing special education too.

— An announcement from the Special Education Legal Fund

“That we were able to hire lawyers to fight the system was key to getting our kids the education that they needed and that they were entitled to by law,” Lai said.

“But when Ulrika and I started comparing notes, we found we were both haunted by the same question: What happens to kids from financially challenged families? Are they getting the special ed they need or are they falling through the cracks? We knew the answer, so we decided to help.”

Golf for S.E.L.F. Fundraising Event

- S.E.L.F. has just launched and will be marking that occasion with a golf fundraiser on Monday, Sept. 24.
- The event will be hosted by Fred Trump, a local father of a child with a disability who has been supporting programs benefiting people with disabilities for years.

The biggest challenge parents face when seeking special education for their child is the difference between their ideas and those of educators on what defines a suitable education for their child.

Although a free and appropriate public education is a right guaranteed to all students under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, IDEA, which was passed in 1990, the realities of special education in the US are far more complex than this act would imply.

IDEA was never fully funded by the federal government, therefore much of the rising costs of educating a rising population of children with disabilities falls squarely on school districts. This lack of funding can create conflict between parents and schools, which sometimes can only be resolved through the legal system.

“In Connecticut, the legal cost to bring a special education case to a due process hearing can be in excess of $50,000,” Lai said. “These financial realities make protecting a child’s rights in special education inaccessible to all but the very affluent.”

Drinkall and Lai created S.E.L.F. with the mission of “helping to level the special education playing field for all families.” S.E.L.F. takes grant applications for families throughout Connecticut that need legal assistance in accessing special education.

“Advocating for a child in special education can be an overwhelming experience,” Lai said. “When a child receives a referral for special education, it is a confusing and emotional time.

“Under pressure and confused, parents who lack information and resources may agree to an educational program that is not appropriate or does not meet their child’s needs,” she said. “We want to make sure parents coming up behind us can have a head start by knowing what we now know, and by having access to the funding that we are making available.”