

THE CITIZEN ADVOCATE

CHATHAM-SAVANNAH
Citizen
Advocacy

Chatham-Savannah Citizen Advocacy Newsletter

SUMMER 2025 EDITION

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A Message From George

Summer is a season of reflection and celebration. For us at Chatham-Savannah Citizen Advocacy it marks a time to look back at the proteges we've met, the matches that have taken root and the advocates who have stepped forward to build relationships that matter.

One of the greatest joys of this year has been hearing directly from advocates about their experiences—the challenges, the lessons, and the unexpected gifts of relationship. In this edition, we highlight two powerful stories shared during one of our most cherished traditions: the BC Lunch.

The BC Lunch: A Legacy of Listening

For more than 25 years, alumni of Benedictine Military School (BC) have hosted a luncheon for Citizen Advocacy. They choose the location, invite their friends, and ask our staff to bring advocates to share stories about their relationships with their proteges. This year, we heard from Corbin Parker and Sarah Hodges, two advocates whose experiences illuminate the heart of what we do.

From Connection to Camera: Corbin and Tom

"Good afternoon, everyone! My name is Corbin Parker..."

That's how Corbin began his talk at the BC Lunch this year, introducing himself not just as a father of four (soon to be five!), a husband, and a business owner, but as someone who has long held Citizen Advocacy close to his heart. His father, BJ Lowenthal, helped start the BC Lunch decades ago and was an advocate himself.

Corbin joined our board last year thinking he might support from the sidelines. But a casual conversation with staff member Rob led to a connection that would change everything—through a shared love of photography, Corbin was introduced to Tom, a talented, determined, and complex man navigating life with autism and a deep passion for photographing people and places.

The BC Lunch: A Legacy of Listening

SOME NAMES IN THESE STORIES HAVE BEEN CHANGED

From Connection to Camera: Corbin and Tom

When they met, Tom was living out of his car. He had recently returned to Savannah from Portland, Oregon, and was trying to get back on his feet. Tom's goals were clear: get his car running, replace his broken camera, and get back to living—not just surviving.

Corbin helped Tom get a job, connect with a Dungeons and Dragons group, and make progress on budgeting. There have been some speed bumps along the way (gemstone dice can be surprisingly pricey!) but the momentum is real. Tom now has a new camera, a repaired car, and plans to begin offering local portrait sessions—building community while doing what he loves.

Corbin says, "Ultimately, Tom wants to go from surviving to living, which is pretty powerful." It's also exactly what advocacy is about.

Earrings, Budgeting & Resilience: Sarah and Carry

George met with Sarah a few times and suggested she read through several seasons of our newsletter. She decided she was interested in going on the Keeping Warm List—and not long after, George introduced her to Carry, a woman full of warmth, resilience, and wisdom

The two bonded quickly over their shared love of unique earrings and crafts. Carry, affectionately nicknamed "Cookie," lives in her own apartment and is known for baking sweet treats for her neighbors. But beneath the sugar and spice is a story marked by hardship: dropping out of school to raise her family, living without a strong support system, and surviving multiple health crises with the help of her daughter, whom she calls "Mommy."

Carry is now 67 and pursuing her GED. Sarah, who grew up with more educational and

financial stability, is learning firsthand about the housing and support challenges people like Carry face. Their friendship has opened new doors: from helping Carry avoid a housing crisis, to protecting her from potential scammers, to getting her set up with a new home aide after being neglected by her previous service provider.

"Ms. Carry has shown me that no matter what obstacles you face, you can do anything you put your mind to," Sarah says. "We've become each other's confidants."

The Covered Dish

A COMMUNITY CELEBRATION

Every year, we host the Covered Dish Supper, a cherished tradition that brings together our community of proteges, advocates, donors, neighbors, and friends. This year, nearly 300 people gathered to celebrate Citizen Advocacy, share a meal, and hear stories that remind us why this work matters.

Guests also received copies of *The Heart of the Matter*, our newly released book chronicling the rich history of Citizen Advocacy in Savannah.

The evening featured three moving reflections from advocates at various stages of their journey:

- George Freeman, advocate for just under a year
- Tania Sammons, advocate for more than 20 years
- Tracy O'Connell, advocate for 10 years



The Covered Dish

A COMMUNITY CELEBRATION

"His Goals Have Become My Goals" – George Freeman

About seven or eight years ago, I met the other George—George Seaborough. It's always a little odd meeting another George. He mentioned that he worked for Citizen Advocacy and explained more about what he did and the benefits of the organization.

He took me out to lunch and even introduced me to a gentleman who might have benefited from an advocate. But at the time, I was just starting my martial arts business. Between paying rent for the studio and working several jobs, the timing just wasn't right.

Fast forward to October 2024—Rob Douberly reached out to me. He said he worked with "the other George" and asked if I'd be open to meeting someone named Jamison.

We met at Spanky's Pizza in Pooler. Jamison was a tall guy in his 30s, friendly, polite, constantly apologizing with a lot of "yes sir" and "no sir." As we talked, his passion for the military became clear. He thanked me for my service, and that moment struck a chord. It reminded me of what I loved most about my time in the Army—helping others reach their goals.



Now, through Citizen Advocacy, I get to do that again.

Jamison and I see each other every couple of weeks. I pick him up from his residence, the day center, or work. He's dedicated and loves working. I helped him transition to a new job recently—one that better fits his strong attention to detail. He takes pride in doing a job well.

We catch up over coffee or a meal and talk about everything—weather, politics, military stories. Lately, our conversations focus on setting goals and how to reach them.

Jamison is a highly intelligent person who wants only the simple things in life: to work and make his own money, to be as independent as possible, to spend time with his girlfriend of nine years, to socialize with others, and to live on his own.

His goals have become my goals. Supporting someone who's working so hard to support himself is not a burden—it's a privilege.

It's a benefit and a blessing to be part of Citizen Advocacy.





“Get Out of Bed, Hold Your Head Up, and Get On With It” – Tania Sammon

I learned about Chatham-Savannah Citizen Advocacy in 1998 through my friend Ashley O’Brien, who had just started working for the organization as their administrator. She and Tom Kohler took me to lunch to talk about my interest in becoming an advocate someday.

The next year, they introduced me to Heather, a student at Savannah High School. She wasn’t being allowed to participate in a program that was open to other students—just because she was in special education. That was against the law. Heather and I met, and we liked each other right away. She has a wonderful smile, a sweet laugh, and a curious mind. Like me, she loves Mexican food.

At first, we spent a lot of time just going out to eat, visiting the beach, or exploring museums. While I wasn’t able to resolve the school issue, our friendship blossomed. In December 2024, we celebrated 25 years of friendship.

I think of myself as Heather’s big sister, and over the years I’ve given her a lot of advice. But recently, those roles reversed. We were on the phone while I was driving for work, and I told her how stressed I’d been feeling. She gave me a pep talk. She reminded me that everyone has stress. Then she said, “Every morning you just need to get out of bed, hold your head up, and get on with it.” It meant so much coming from someone who’s faced so many obstacles of her own.

Beyond my friendship with Heather, I’ve stayed deeply involved with Citizen Advocacy. I’ve served on the board twice, hosted events in my home, cooked many dishes (including a legendary crab casserole!) for Covered Dish Suppers, and most recently, I wrote a book: *The Heart of the Matter: The Story of Chatham-Savannah Citizen Advocacy*.

The book shares the history of this organization through stories and photos, capturing what makes this work powerful. I hope you’ll enjoy it—copies are available after the program.

I want to close by sharing a quote from Tom Kohler, published in a 2009 article called “Light of the Lamp,” and reprinted in *The Heart of the Matter*, page 125:

“Year after year, we tell stories of people being more present and responsible in one another’s lives... Gradually, our picture of what people can come to mean to one another becomes the picture of what people can come to mean to one another in our community.”

“When the accepted expectation of how we treat one another begins to change, we call that social change. It’s our fifty-year vision—to create a change in what people mean to one another in Savannah.”



"More Than a Mission: A Decade of Friendship" – Tracy O'Connell

I distinctly remember the day I met Melissa almost ten years ago. Our friendship started with a mission or a problem to solve. I walked into the Citizens Advocacy office, and she was in the conference room with her Mother and Father meeting with Tom Kohler. Her parents had found Citizens Advocacy because they were at their wits' end trying to figure out how to get some of her benefits reinstated after mysteriously being cut off. Her parents were from out of town and had tried every avenue they could think of and stumbled upon Citizens Advocacy. It shows just what a lifeline this organization is!

Melissa and I embarked on trying to solve the problem with lots of calls, and hold times, trying to get answers and ultimately trips to the government office to speak with someone who could help and not be ignored on the phone. We ultimately got the benefits reinstated. I am sad to say that was not our last time having to go and try and get benefits sorted out or documentation updated to preserve benefits that are threatened as that has been a recurring theme over all these years.

However, the main thing that came out of those trips to DFACS was a shared love of eating out and exploring new things. Early on, we had been at the office so long that it was the lunch hour and we were hungry so we

stopped to have lunch together. That was the first time we ventured into getting to know each other beyond two people trying to solve a problem. It was enjoyable spending time not focused on the problem solving and I realized it would be nice to explore and expand that connection. It started what has become our routine and a shared interest. We both enjoy eating out and try to have lunch every other Saturday. Melissa takes lead on trying to find new spots and does a great job mixing things up. We have a running list of places we want to try as well as our favorite spots. It is nice to have that face to face check in that we can count on.

We try and add in activities too to explore our city. We tried the movies but have wildly different tastes. If anyone likes a horror/slasher movie, Melissa is the person you should go with! She has little interest in my Hallmark holiday movies!

We also have bonded over our pets. When I first met Melissa, she had a dog Jesse but now has a cat Tiger. I too have had cats over the years and we compare notes on just how cuddly and crazy they are including being woken at 3 a.m. to play.

There have been many good times—and hard times too—but it's been comforting to have each other through them. Over the years, we have both lost beloved parents. Melissa unexpectedly lost her father while I lost my mother after a very long battle. I know our friendship gave me comfort in those difficult times and I hope I was able to give her comfort in those difficult times and I hope I was able to give her comfort too. It is nice to have a friend that we can express our grief and emotions.

While the main thing that has come from this is our friendship, it has also affected me personally. I had little experience navigating the world of disabled persons or understanding of the many road blocks. A few years ago, Melissa and I were at our regular lunch and I saw she had a large bandage on her hand. In



“More Than a Mission: A Decade of Friendship” – Continued

her typical, strong and stoic way she said it was not a big deal. In pulling the bandage back, I realized there was more to it – she had lost a battle with a knife while cutting a particularly stubborn butternut squash and was left with a very nasty cut. We left the restaurant and went immediately to the emergency room. While the medical staff were all helpful, there was little consideration for how Melissa could go through surgery and post-surgery care. The paperwork was head spinning and trying to coordinate it was overwhelming. Most of her appointments were at the St. Joseph’s campus where there was public transportation but the doctors would shift her appointment to the Pooler campus which had no public transportation. It was an eye opening experience.

Equally revealing to me was appreciation for the independence that Melissa has. After seeing there are road blocks, it was nice to see her live her life as she wants.

Last fall, my office was in the middle of a move and we ended up in temporary space which was almost directly across the street from where Melissa lives. The office was so cramped that I would often go stand in the parking lot on phone calls. One day, I was talking to someone on the phone and looked across Hodgson Memorial and saw Melissa walking with purpose – I believe walking to a RedBox to get a horror film! My first reaction was surprise and thinking I needed to call out to her to see what was going on but then I caught myself and realized this is exactly what is supposed to happen. Melissa going about her life.

I know our friendship will evolve and grow and look forward to what the next decade will bring. We are thankful to Citizens Advocacy for bringing us together.

A Year in Reflection

TWO GATHERINGS, ONE MISSION

As we reflect on the past year of Citizen Advocacy, two events rise to the top as powerful reminders of why this work matters: the BC Lunch and the Covered Dish Supper. At the BC Lunch we heard from advocates Corbin Parker and Sarah Hodges—each new to advocacy, but already deeply embedded in meaningful relationships. Their stories revealed how friendship can begin with a shared hobby, a cup of coffee, or even a random word like “photography.” Through their openness, we saw how small connections can grow into lasting commitments.

At the Covered Dish, we celebrated stories rooted in longevity and legacy. George Freeman spoke as a new advocate learning how to support someone’s dreams. Tania Sammons reflected on 25 years of friendship with Heather—reminding us that wisdom flows both ways. Tracy O’Connell shared how a problem-solving mission grew into a rich and supportive bond that has weathered life’s joys and hardships.

Together, these two events reflect the full spectrum of advocacy—new beginnings and long-held relationships, practical support and emotional resilience, shared meals and life lessons.

They show us what happens when people say yes to one another—and mean it. They remind us that real change doesn’t happen in policy alone—it happens in the trust built between two people, over time, with care.

That is the heart of Citizen Advocacy. And we’re so glad you’re part of it.

- Chatham-Savannah Citizen Advocacy





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