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December 10, 1997

Office of Staff Development and Training
Walnut Hill Center
7423 Camp Alger Avenue
Falls Church, VA 22042

Dear Screening Committee Members:

I support Kathleen May's nomination of Ms. Cathy Thornton for the Teacher of the Year and The Washington Post Agnes Meyer Outstanding Teacher Award. I believe this award will give her the recognition she has earned. Cathy is not part of a high profile program but rather one most people overlook. Her dedication and commitment serve her students well as they embark on their journey through life.

Fortunately, there are teachers like Cathy Thornton who can fulfill the basic education needs and meet the additional challenges required by children and families associated with special education. I believe that all the families with a child in Cathy's class have benefited from her motivation and unique experience. She willingly shares different approaches and techniques with her student's families to help them cope with difficulties they may be having at home. This has proved invaluable to my family.

There is no better way to describe the abilities and influence of Cathy Thornton than to tell you the story of my daughter. I met Cathy three years ago when we moved to Fairfax County. I knew that my daughter Alexandra "Alex" was having trouble in areas of her development so I had her tested at Child Find. The testers deemed Alex as "untestable" and possibly autistic. Within a few months, I had to make a decision regarding her placement in one of two programs.

Cathy remained quiet as the other teacher promoted the non-categorical program consisting of eleven children. While I knew Alex needed help, I did not feel the non-categorical program with many different degrees of disabilities would be best. During this discussion, I also felt the teacher lacked compassion for what we were facing. When Cathy spoke, she said that, after reviewing Alex's files, she felt she could help. Cathy explained that her classroom was a self-contained program for children with autism. The class currently had three students with one teacher and one instructional aide. She assured me that two of the three children were high functioning as Alex and she would be a welcome addition to the class.

I knew very little about Autism except for reading a few related articles. I knew that Alex did not fit the definition exactly, but exhibited several autistic characteristics. I believed that she would benefit from the small, self contained classroom with Cathy. I left the meeting relieved and felt that Cathy understood what Alex was going through and would help and support Alex in her development.

For the 1995-96 school year Alex remained in Cathy's classroom in the mornings and mainstreamed in the afternoon kindergarten general education program (e.g., lunch, music, P.E. and centers). I felt Alex should have been included more, but I trusted Cathy's judgment and as the year progressed I began to understand. Alex lacked a lot of the social, communication, speech and language skills necessary to remain in the general education classroom for longer periods of time. Cathy assured me that she would push Alex as much as she felt she could handle.

In first grade, Alex and three of her peers were included in a general education classroom with Cathy's support. Alex developed many social skills and learned to interact with her peers in a more "appropriate" manner. She began to mature and her confidence was building. In November 1996, I enrolled her in a combination ballet and tap class at her request. I had tried numerous classes in the past and she would not participate. She loved it and performed with her class at the recital in June 1997. Alex also participated in the school's Talent Show, Hands On Science and other extracurricular activities.

During the summer, Cathy continued to work with Alex to prepare her for the challenging year of inclusion she had planned. During this time Cathy carefully selected a second grade teacher knowing that this would be crucial to her success.

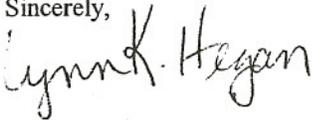
Well, here we are, December 1997, sometimes I think I am dreaming. I am so proud of Alex's achievements. She has always been a happy child but this is definitely her year to shine. Alex spends nearly the entire day in second grade. She has developed by leaps and bounds academically, socially and emotionally and for the first time accepted by her peers. No one, including Cathy, had expected this to happen so quickly. I recently attended the first quarter conference and her second grade teacher said Alex is performing "on grade level" with minimal support in certain areas.

Alex's success has not been without struggle because everyday tasks continue to be a challenge for her. Through it all, Cathy is there to provide guidance and with her support Alex masters each obstacle. If all continues to go well, Alex could possibly attend her home base school next fall.

As one can see, the achievements have been great for my child, whom Child Find deemed "untestable" upon entering kindergarten. I believe this is a tribute to the teaching and leadership abilities of Cathy Thornton. She has been a major contributor to my daughter's success story and has made me see that the sky is the limit to Alex's achievements. Alex continues to benefit from Cathy's knowledge and experience and I feel she has laid the foundation for her success in the future. I feel that our entire family is truly blessed to have met and befriended Cathy Thornton.

Our story is not unique among the families of children taught by Cathy. Her creative abilities and dedication to her students enable them to achieve their full potential. I believe Cathy exceeds all the qualities of an excellent teacher and lives up to the high standards of this prestigious award. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Lynn K. Hegan". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned to the right of the word "Sincerely,".

Lynn K. Hegan