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Ursula Markey, 62, children's advocate

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Ursula Markey, a nationally known advocate for children with disabilities, died Monday of complications from diabetes at West Jefferson Medical Center. She was 62.

Ms. Markey earned her expertise through first-hand experience, by advocating for her son Duane Markey, who as a toddler in 1975 was diagnosed with autism, then a relatively unknown disability.

She fought tirelessly for thousands of children through the Pyramid Community Parent Resource Center, which she ran with D.J. Markey, her husband of 38 years. But she was perhaps more skilled as a peacemaker.

"She was so full of grace," said Karran Harper Royal, the mother of two special-needs children and a well-known children's advocate who worked alongside Ms. Markey.

Ms. Markey always saw the best in others, from the most trying children to the most implacable school officials, Royal said.

"One of Ursula's famous sayings was, 'Think your highest thoughts about people,' And people often rose to those expectations," she said. With Ms. Markey's help, children excelled. With her guidance, teachers and parents could shift their focus from children's troublesome behaviors to their positive qualities, she said.

Nearly 30 years ago, Duane was kicked out of school soon after he started. So the Markeys -- both schoolteachers in the district -- had to figure out how to get their employer to comply with federal education standards. Relying on a relatively new law that guaranteed an "individualized education" for every child, they filed suit against Orleans Parish Schools and won the right to send Duane to a special school of their choice.

But by that time, they were finding that Duane flourished when he was mainstreamed into regular public school classrooms. "We learned that you can't take your child out of the community to prepare him to live in it," Ms. Markey said in a 2004 interview. "So we had won something we didn't want."

The couple discovered that their hard-won victories for Duane could be helpful to the rest of the community. "Our neighbors would say, 'I see Duane doing this, how did you do that?' So we'd learn and then teach them," Ms. Markey said.

In 1991, the Markeys founded Pyramid, a name rooted in African-American culture and in the idea that each parent would teach two more families, allowing the knowledge base to grow exponentially, like a pyramid. The center grew into a sought-after national

resource for advocates trying to engage parents in underserved communities. In 2002, the couple won a \$120,000 award for their work from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the country's foremost private source of money for health-related work.

One of the hallmarks of Pyramid parent training was "positive behavioral support" -- changing children's behavior by emphasizing the good they do. Once they began employing positive-behavioral principles, Ms. Markey had said, "we began noticing the many wonderful things our son did. And the more we noticed, the more he did them." Ms. Markey was an avid political junkie who had testified before Congress and knew the intricacies of many issues from watching hearings on CSPAN. Shortly before her death -- after she'd had both legs amputated -- she said she was looking forward to living "the second half of her life" and eagerly anticipated Barack Obama's first day as president, friends said.

She also was a talented painter and a historian of sorts, devoted to documenting the cultural achievements of her beloved childhood neighborhood, the 7th Ward. At the time of her death, she was working on a painting of the neighborhood's historic market, Circle Foods.

In addition to her husband, survivors include a son, Teiko Markey of New Orleans, and two brothers, Ronald Arceneaux of Kenner and Lawrence Arceneaux of Los Angeles. Her son Duane Markey died in 1998.

A Mass will be said today at 10 a.m., with visitation at 9 a.m., at Corpus Christ Catholic Church, 2022 St. Bernard Ave. Rhodes Funeral Home is in charge of the arrangements.