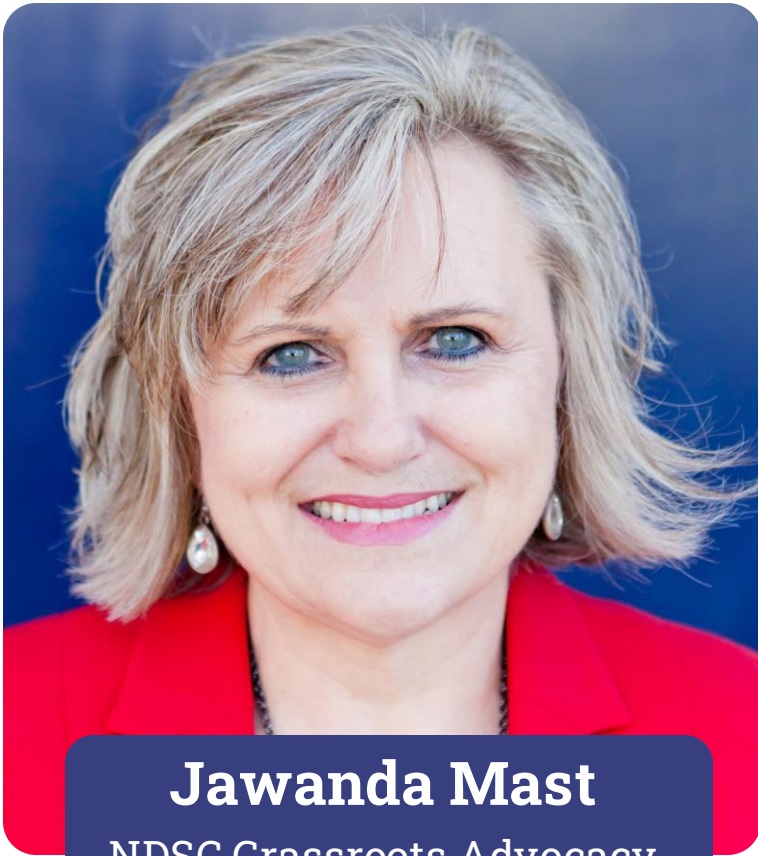


The Story Squad - Your Story is the Strategy: Making it Stick with Decision-Makers



Jawanda Mast
NDSC Grassroots Advocacy
Manager



Sam Iannone
NDSC Communications
Coordinator



Jessie Smart
NDSC Policy Advisory
Council Member

NDSC DOWN SYNDROME POLICY SUMMIT — TRAINING DAY

Your Story Is the Strategy

Telling your story helps decision makers listen.

- **Jawanda Mast** NDSC Grassroots Advocacy Manager
- **Sam Iannone** NDSC Communications Coordinator
- **Jessie Smart** Self-Advocate and NDSC Policy Advisory Council

The Story Squad



Jawanda Mast

NDSC Grassroots Advocacy Manager

- Manages NDAC (NDSC's Grassroots Advocacy Program)
- Helps advocates turn everyday experience into organized, effective action on the Hill
- Everyone has a personal story that can impact change
- Mom to Rachel, who has Down syndrome
- I'm the SassySouthernGal
- College football season is the most wonderful time of the year



Sam Iannone

NDSC Communications Manager

- Runs the NDSC Communications and Marketing Department by leading social media management, email marketing, website design, graphic design, brand management, and more.
- Board member at Down Syndrome Association of Southern New Jersey
- Sibling to Gabby with Down syndrome
- Has a cat named Paw Rudd



Jessie Smart

Self-Advocate

- Employed at the Arc NW MS and as a bookkeeper
- NDSC Policy Advisory Council, Microsoft Advisory Committee, MS Council on Developmental Disabilities; NDAC member
- Uses her experiences to help change perceptions of people with disabilities
- Completed discipleship and lay leadership training
- Qualified to serve as a minister

You're Ready for This

You already put in the work. Here's what you brought with you into today's room:



Hill Day Logistics

You know the schedule, the route, and what to expect on the Hill tomorrow.



Your One-Pager

You've built the leave-behind that anchors every meeting you'll have.



The Big Asks

You understand what's at stake and why it matters for the Down syndrome community.

Today, we turn what you know into what you say and how you say it.

Tips for Your Meeting



Arrive Early and Wear Your Nametag

Get there a few minutes early with your nametag visible, and introduce yourself to the staff member at the front.



Start With Hello and Thank You

Introduce yourself and your organization, thank them, and make a local connection.



Meetings are short. Stick with the Plan.

In a larger group, not everyone will speak, so share the room. Follow your training-day plan, put self-advocates first, and move quickly to your asks and the stories behind them.



Be Yourself. Be Specific. Listen.

Keep it personal. Give them your one-pager, but don't read it.



Leave With a Next Step and Say Thank You

Agree on a next step, then thank them in person, on social media, and with a follow-up note.



Tomorrow, you are going to walk into congressional offices with a folder, a one-pager, and your asks.

But the most important thing you are bringing into that room cannot be printed on a piece of paper.

It is your story.

Data Opens the Door

Your story walks through it.



Lawmakers hear many facts and numbers every day.

- Facts prove the problem is real.
- Explain:
 - Data gives us the facts.
 - Policy tells us what needs to change.



They remember one face, one family.

- Story makes the data personal, and personal is what people carry out of the room and vote on.
- Stories help decision makers understand the human impact behind the policy.
- Important distinction:
 - “Your story does not replace the data. Your story gives the data meaning.”

Make Your Story Stick

- Your story **does not** have to be complicated.
 - Start with **the person**, not the policy.
 - Make it **personal** and **specific**.
- Know your **one thing**.
 - What is the one thing you want them to **remember**?
- Connect your **story** to your **ask**.
 - Show **why** this issue matters and **what** you want them to do.



SHORT

You may only have a few minutes.

SPECIFIC

Share a real person and a real moment.

PERSONAL

Tell them what happened to you or someone you know.

CONNECTED

Connect your experience to the policy.

ACTIONABLE

End with what you want them to do.

Why Rachel's "Pink House" Story Sticks

- **It makes policy personal.** A complicated savings law becomes a simple story about wanting to marry, live independently, and own a home.
- **It gives people something to remember.** "Rachel's Pink House" is easier to remember than a policy number or a long explanation of the ABLE Act.
- **It connects a dream to action.** Rachel's dream became an advocacy message that helped keep the focus on why changing the law mattered.
- Twelve years after the law passed, the Pink House story is still part of the conversation.

A good story gives people a reason to remember the issue.



The “So What?” Test

**Tell
your
story**

**Why
does it
matter?**

**Connect it
to the
policy**

**Make
your
ask**

The “So What?” turns a personal story into an advocacy story.

Your story
+
the “So What?”
=
our Advocacy Ask

You do not need a “perfect story”

You do not need:

- A perfect story
- Policy expertise
- Fancy words
- A memorized speech

You do need:

- Your experience
- Your voice
- Your connection to the issue
- Your ask

Tell the story that is true to you.

Remember: You are building a relationship.

- If you already have a relationship with the office, this is a chance to strengthen it.
- If you have not met with the office before, **today is the beginning of a relationship.**
- You may not get everything you ask for in one meeting, and that is okay.
- Be respectful, listen, find common ground, and leave the door open for future conversations.
- Follow up after the meeting and keep the relationship going.



Think beyond the ask. Think about the relationship you are beginning to build.



My Advocacy Journey

How I started

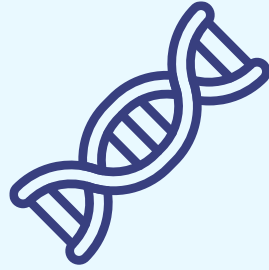
- Started with my Dad
- Board service is a good place to start
- Local
- NDSC

Continued Advocacy

- Spoke at the first DS Day at the Mississippi State Capitol
- Appointed to the Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities
- Invited to pray and speak to the Mississippi Legislature

We, as self-advocates, are the experts on our lives.

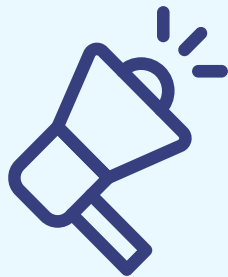
Why are self-advocates' voices important?



Individuals living with Down syndrome really know what we want and need.



We have lived experience to say what needs to change to make our lives more meaningful and live our dreams.



When there is a discussion that is affecting us, we must speak out and speak up.

Tell Your Personal Story

- Laws and dates are good to know.
- But there is one tool that is more powerful than anything else.

It's YOUR STORY.

- Your most powerful tool is your story! Telling an elected official how something will impact your life is powerful.

THIS IS MY
story

Build Your Story: Three Easy Steps

This is me:

Tell them your name and what is your connection to Down syndrome.

This is what's happening:

What is happening and how it impacts you or someone you value.

This is what I need:

What is the one specific action you want this person to take? Often called "The Ask."

Your Story is Your Strategy

My name is **Jessie Smart**. I am 37 years old and live in Olive Branch, Mississippi. I work two jobs. I am employed at The Arc of Northwest Mississippi and also work as a bookkeeper for a local landscape company.

I am proud to be an active advocate and leader. I serve on the **National Down Syndrome Congress Policy & Advocacy Council** and the **NDSC Self-Advocate Council**, and I am a member of the **National Down Syndrome Advocacy Coalition (NDAC)**.

In 2024, I was honored to receive a gubernatorial appointment to the **Mississippi Council on Developmental Disabilities**, where I am serving a four-year term. I also serve a four-year term on the **Microsoft Advisory Committee**, working to help ensure that artificial intelligence technology is accessible to people with disabilities.



Today, I am asking you to support the **Transformation to Competitive Integrated Employment Act (TCIEA), S. 2438 / H.R. 4771**. I work two jobs and earn fair wages. I love being able to work and earn a paycheck. However, I have friends with disabilities who are still being paid less than minimum wage for their work. **I do not think that is fair.**

People with Down syndrome should have the opportunity to work alongside people with and without disabilities, earn fair wages, and be included in their communities. Passing the TCIEA will help expand employment opportunities and strengthen the supports people with disabilities need to succeed.

It is a privilege to advocate alongside and on behalf of people with Down syndrome. I take my role seriously because **people with Down syndrome have important things to say. We know what we need.**

Will you support the TCIEA and help ensure that people with disabilities have the opportunity to earn fair wages and work in their communities?

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,
Jessica Smart
Street Address
City, State, Zip Code
Phone
Email

Jessie's Story - Elevator Speech

- Hello, and thank you for meeting with us today.
- My name is Jessie Smart. I am a self-advocate with Down syndrome from Olive Branch, Mississippi.
- I work two jobs, and I get paid a fair wage for my work.
- But many of my friends with disabilities do not get paid a fair wage. Some get paid only a few dollars for the work they do. This happens because of an old law that lets some employers pay us less than minimum wage.
- That is not fair.
- Would you please sponsor the Transformation to Competitive Integrated Employment Act, or TCIEA. It would end that old law over time and help businesses create good, fair-paying jobs for people with disabilities.
- Wouldn't you agree that people with disabilities deserve to be treated with respect just like everyone else?
- Thank you for listening and thank you for your support.

Why Jessie's Speech Works

Jessie's model focuses on TCIEA — yours doesn't have to

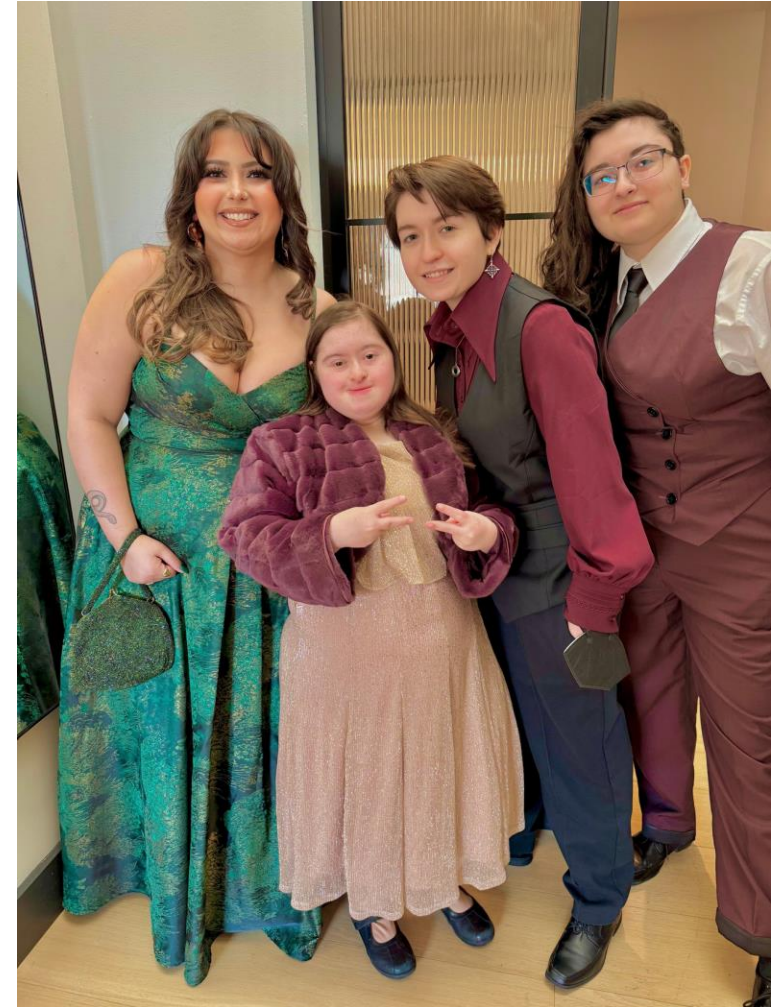
Jessie's story works because it is:

- Short and to the point
- Specific to her Ask
- Personal and emotional out of concern for her friends
- Connected directly to the Ask
- Actionable steps for legislators to take

Here's another example of an elevator speech...

Sam's Story - Elevator Speech

- My name is Sam Iannone. I'm the National Down Syndrome Congress Communications Coordinator and I live in New Jersey.
- My sister, Gabby, is 21 and has Down syndrome. She is medically complex, and takes many medications including an eye-sight saving medication.
- This medication is extremely expensive and Gabby needs Medicaid in order to pay for this medication.
- Gabby uses the HCBS waiver to get involved in the community through classes such as choir, art, and music.
- Her ability to be involved in the community is dependent upon the supports provided on the HCBS waiver.
- Will you please support the HCBS Access Act?
- Thank you for your support!



Hands-On Activity

Elevator Speech Practice

The Not-So-Secret Secrets of Social Media Advocacy



@thendsc



@ndscongress



ndsccenter.org

The Not-So-Secret Secrets of Social Media Advocacy

Gen Z's digital screen attention span is 1.7 seconds on average

- Short-form content has made our on-screen attention spans drop significantly
- Your content should adapt to these trends

Short. Concise. Impactful.

Social media is your elevator speech for the virtual world

Three Must-Haves for Your Post

- **Always ask for a photo with your legislator or staffers to recap the meeting**
 - Smiling faces of their constituents make a huge impact
 - OR film a video reiterating your Ask
- **Tag your legislator, not the campaign**
 - During campaign season, legislators typically have a separate social media account for their run. Make sure to know the difference.
 - Make sure you are following the legislator, even if you disagree with them.
- **Get to the point**
 - Your caption should hit three specific points fairly quickly:
 - Thank you to your legislator
 - The Ask
 - How it impacts YOU

Identify Your Audience and Adapt

Who are you trying to reach?

For Elected Officials and Policy Makers

- Easy to digest, plain-language points
- The **less** words, the better
- A clear ask that is easy to agree with
- Photos showing **WHO** this is impacting
 - OR a simple graphic that can easily be related to
- Specific stories that relate to the **shared experiences** of those within the Down syndrome community
- Think of the **RESHARE VALUE**
 - Will someone look at this and immediately say, “YES! I am ON BOARD.”

Reshare Value

Social media is a curated archive of someone's life

The Archives

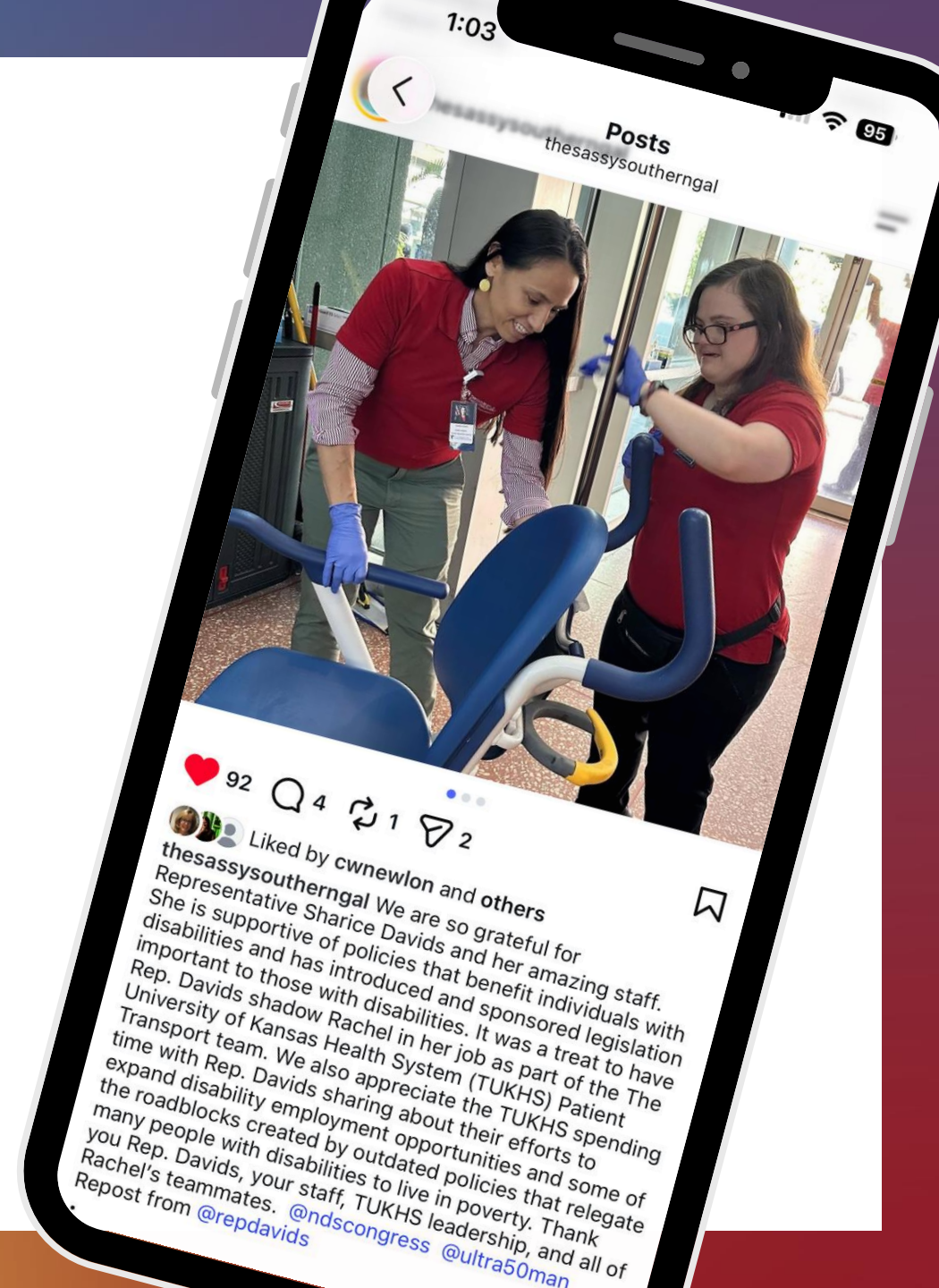
- Social media acts as an archive of the different aspects and chapters of your life
- We strive to relate to others, so a simple like or repost can make someone feel less alone
- You don't know who is dealing with something behind the scenes. Your reshare could open a door to the community for someone longing to find it.

Mood Board

- Think of someone's profile as their mood board
- I repost what speaks to me and what my followers need to know about me
- A "to the point" graphic or a photo can show my followers what I'm passionate about

Kindness is Key

- Social media can be a nasty place, especially in the political-sphere
- **AVOID**
 - Name calling
 - Pitting sides against each other
 - Shaming them for their votes
- **DO**
 - Thank them for meeting with you
 - Share how this Ask will specifically impact YOU (their constituent)
 - Ask others to join your advocacy efforts
 - Be respectful



Let's See It In Action

Good Example

Thank you to **Senator Cory Booker's** office for meeting with us to discuss ways to support the **Down syndrome community** in New Jersey!

We spoke about the **SSI Penalty Elimination Act (S. 1234)**, which would raise the outdated asset limit for individuals and couples with disabilities, like **my sister Gabby**, and allow them to save for their future. This is the beginning of a long advocacy journey, but we are happy to have our voices heard. The first step to speaking up is to **SHOW UP!**

Contact your own Senators to discuss this important legislation!

Bad Example

We had a **very unproductive** meeting with our local representative's office today. We were met with **young staffers instead of the elected official**, who **didn't know anything about the bills we were talking about**, which was the first red flag.

The second red flag? Finding out that our representative **voted directly against people with disabilities**. Why did we spend the time to go to their office if we are just met with kids and no one listens to us? Clearly, we were not a priority for them.

Pro tip: Do not trust this person to advocate for us.

Educate, Don't Condesate

.....

- A made-up word for a very real point
(The verb is actually condescend, but it doesn't rhyme)
- We are there to educate legislative offices on the impact that these Asks will have on the Down syndrome community, NOT to argue or accuse
- Relationship building is the first step to creating policy change



TLDR

- Get to the point!
- Grab a photo
- Tag the legislator
- Know your audience
- Be kind!!!
- Educate, Don't Condesate

WE WANT TO SEE YOUR BEAUTIFUL POSTS!

- #NDSC
- #NDSCSummit2026
- #DSpolicysummit



The 4 Rs of Advocacy Relationships

A single meeting is a start. These four habits are what turn it into a relationship.



Respect

Keep it respectful,
even when you
disagree.



Recognition

Publicly thank
officials on social
media and in
newsletters.



Relationships

Advocacy is a long
game built on
people, not just
votes.



Realize the Power of Staff

Staff can matter
as much as the
elected official,
focus on building
that relationship
too.

Advocacy is a marathon, not a sprint.

**No permanent friends.
No permanent enemies.**



Building Relationships That Make Advocacy Stronger

Tomorrow, You Tell It.

*You know your story.
You know your ask. You are the expert
decision makers need to hear from.*

See you bright and early for Hill Day.

Questions tonight?
Find Jawanda, Sam, or Jessie.



@thendsc



@ndscongress



ndscenter.org