

Polly Arango

‘Everyone Deserves Better’

Activist Fought For the Disabled

BY JUAN CARLOS RODRIGUEZ
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Longtime activist Polly Arango, who traveled the country and the world fighting for the rights of disabled children and their families, died Saturday in a freak accident in Colorado.

Arango, 68, was vacationing in Colorado with her husband and two of her grandsons when she fell and hit her head on a car door, her daughter, Francesca Wilson, said Sunday.

Wilson said Arango, who lived in Algodones, was a co-founder of Family Voices, an Albuquerque-based national nonprofit dedicated to family-centered care for children and youth with special health care needs or disabilities, and of Parents Reaching Out, an

Albuquerque-based nonprofit that helped educate and advocate for New Mexico parents of disabled children.

“She thought that the most vulnerable needed a voice,” Wilson said of her mother. “She thought families who have children with disabilities are just pushed aside, and a lot of times they don’t speak up for themselves.”

Arango was a plaintiff in the Jackson case, a huge class action suit filed in 1987 that led to the deinstitutionalization of people with developmental disabilities in New Mexico.

Her interest in working with disabled children began when she and her husband adopted a son who has a genetic muscular disorder and



ARANGO:
Died after hitting head on car door

uses a wheelchair, Wilson said.

“She said the way she and my brother were treated by the medical and educational community drove her to take action,” Wilson said of her mother.

Arango was at one time on the boards of New Mexico Voices for Children, the New Mexico Development Disabilities Planning Council, the New Mexico Medicaid Advisory Committee, the National Childhood Disability Commission, the Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care, and other groups.

She traveled to places such as Russia and Norway to make presentations about family-centered care of disabled children, said Lance Chilton, an Albuquerque pediatrician.

“Polly was the most important person in the country in alerting physicians and others who care for children with special needs that families are the experts in the care of their children,” he said.

John Foley, executive director

of The Arc of New Mexico from 1988 to 2001, said he worked with Arango extensively.

“She was a mover and a shaker here,” Foley said. “She raised her eyes toward a vision that was not present in New Mexico at the time. Care for disabled children had always been in institutional settings, and she felt, as I and a lot of other people did, that things could be better.”

Wilson said her mother always credited her dedication to her Irish-Catholic upbringing.

“She was taught you always help everyone. She taught her children the same thing,” Wilson said, explaining that her mother’s philosophy was that “everyone deserves better.”

Wilson said Arango loved traveling and gardening, and that her grandchildren were “the light of her life.”

Funeral arrangements are pending.