

In Memory of Therese O'Connor (1956 – 2008)



Therese O'Connor died peacefully in Boulder, Colorado after a long, courageous battle with breast cancer. She was born and raised in Brooklyn, New York, educated at Fordham University, and came to San Francisco in 1988 where she met and married Keith Shandalow. Their son Nick was born in 1994 and daughter Kate three years later. Therese, who also obtained a Master's Degree from San Francisco State University in Special Education, had a number of careers, but her passion was working with schools to better serve and integrate children with autism.

Therese worked for nearly 20 years with children on the autism spectrum and their families. She was a special educator in New York and California public schools. At San Francisco State University she served as a researcher on a federally funded project *Integrated Play Groups Project: Innovations in Special Education* (1989-1992). She continues to be widely cited for her seminal study that centered on understanding the perspectives of professionals trained to support children on the autism spectrum to socialize and play with typical peers in Integrated Play Groups (IPG). Noted for her expertise as an IPG Master Guide, Therese co-founded the Autism Institute on Peer Socialization and Play in 2000*. She served as lead field supervisor while training teachers, therapists and parents to implement the IPG model in school, home and community settings.

Therese's dream was to create an inclusive center that would carry on her efforts to support children on the autism spectrum to socialize and play with peers. New centers for Integrated Play Groups have been launched and named in Therese's honor in partnership with after-school programs and schools in the San Francisco Bay Area and Vancouver, B.C., Canada.

Therese had a beautiful spirit and a passion for life even when life wasn't easy. She was warm, intelligent, fun, compassionate, curious, creative and exuberant, and she loved and was loved by many whose lives she touched in a deeply profound way.

Therese is survived by her loving husband Keith; son Nick and daughter Kate; mother Peggy; brothers Ed (Diane), Kenny (Rosemary) and Bill (Janet); many nieces and nephews, and many loving friends in the Bay Area, New York, Boulder, and beyond. She will be deeply missed by all who knew her.

* The *Autism Institute on Peer Socialization and Play* was renamed to *Autism Collective on Peer Socialization, Play & Imagination* autismcollective.org