

“... this gentleman, my brother, older brother, IQ of 35, TAUGHT ME, he was a teacher, he taught me, how one lives with disabilities. He opened my eyes and my heart to the issue of disabilities. That’s why I’m here ...”

These words came from James T. (Jim) Brett at the 32nd anniversary celebration of the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in Washington, DC on July 26, 2022. Jim was invited as a guest speaker by host Rep. James Langevin (D-RI). Part of the invitation was due to Jim’s role as Vice Chair of the National Council on Disability, and partly due to Mr. Brett’s 40-plus years of service as an energetic advocate for people with disabilities and his long-time friendship with Rep. Langevin.

Jack Brett was born in 1934 to Mary Ann Brett, a recent immigrant from an Irish farm. This first born in this family, Jack was diagnosed early with severe intellectual disabilities, so it was suggested that he would not live long. Mother Brett was advised by her doctor to have no more children and to send her infant son to an institution where ‘the burden would be lifted’ from her and her family. She refused. Jack lived at home surrounded by love from his family, including five younger siblings until he passed away in 2010 at the age of 76. Jim Brett’s advocacy for those in need and facing life challenges arises from the lifelong lessons and amazing grace of his Mother, older Brother, and countless other examples of love and devotion.

Jim’s works as a prominent disability advocate at the state, national, and local levels. His résumé is the best source for detailing his numerous roles in advocacy organizations, so I will only summarize here: Present Chair of the President’s Committee for People with Intellectual Disabilities, appointed by both President Obama and President Biden; appointed to the President’s Committee for People with Intellectual Disabilities by President George W. Bush; appointed by former Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi to serve on the National Council on Disability (including a seven year term as the Vice Chair); Chair of the Governor’s Commission on Intellectual Disability for the past 22 years, appointed by four governors; Chair of the Disabled Persons Protection Commission in Massachusetts (2016-present); served as a trusted disability advisor to three Presidents of the United States.

Several links and supplemental sources are included with this nomination letter which more completely describe his long record of service and activism. In searching through myriad documents and records I uncovered a beautiful gem from Jim’s long-time mentor and friend Steve Perlman, *“Jim understands this stuff intuitively, because of his brother. But what makes him special is his sense of purpose, his belief that we all have a responsibility for the most vulnerable among us. He takes it personally. I wish we all took it personally.”*

A second major pillar supporting this nomination effort is Jim Brett’s service as the President and Chief Executive Officer of the New England Council (NEC), our region’s “premier business advocacy and networking association,” since October of 1996. The best way to describe the NEC is from its own website (excerpted):

“The Council is a non-partisan alliance of businesses, academic and health institutions, and public and private organizations throughout New England formed to promote

economic growth and a high quality of life in the New England region ... headquartered in Boston, MA and ... fully staffed in Washington, D.C.

(Its) mission is to identify and support federal public policies and articulate the voice of its membership regionally and nationally on important issues facing New England. The Council works to foster positive working relationships between its members and key federal policymakers, including members of Congress and leaders of key federal agencies. As a non-partisan organization, the Council has forged strong relationships with leaders on both sides of the aisle and has won the respect of Democrats and Republicans alike.”

The NEC hosts an event for every New England Member of Congress at least once per year for NEC members. Since NEOA is a member of the NEC (at a discounted rate!) this gives us access to Senators, Members of Congress, and their key staff members, who have legislative power on the policies and funding for TRIO Programs. NEC events also provide us with a venue for access to the regional power brokers who might be advocates for all that we do in TRIO. Participating in NEC events allows us to share a breakfast table with the CEO of a regional hospital, a top executive for the Boston Red Sox, a former candidate from New Hampshire for Governor and Senate, the COO of a regional airport (these are all recent tablemates), and top-level business executives, higher education leaders, professional lobbyists, and heads of government relations teams. The NEC is a valuable ally in leveraging our TRIO mission, which includes NEC staff (e.g., the directors of federal affairs) who are constantly working with Congress. We have forged a close alliance with Mariah Healy who chairs the NEC Higher Education Committee and fully understands TRIO program and issues.

Jim always makes an effort to extend a heartfelt greeting to NEOA members and TRIO personnel and takes time to discuss current issues. At an NEC event in Portland, Maine in 2013, Jim and his staff were debriefing and planning ahead after all of the guests had departed. We planned to say a quick 'goodbye and thank you' and leave the NEC staff to their work, but ended up getting an expert 20-minute tutorial from Jim on the current state of Congressional politics while he proudly shared that he was a Boston College Upward Bound Alumnus! This was my first awareness that he is a two-year UB participant from the very first programs in the country! I was honored to nominate Jim as one of the six COE National TRIO Achievers which he received in September, 2023 at the COE National Conference in Washington, DC.

Growing up as the youngest in a family of six children in South Boston and graduating from South Boston High School (now the site of Excel HS), Jim earned his BA from American University. He returned to live in Dorchester earning an advanced degree from nearby Suffolk University as well as the Harvard Kennedy School of Government.

While Jim’s current role in a high-profile, action-oriented, non-partisan organization necessitates the bringing together leaders and legislators of all stripes, his political acumen and deep wisdom of *how things actually get done* were forged through 16 years as a State Representative in Massachusetts. As Chair of the Banking and Taxation Committees much of his work was focused on tax legislation and financial initiatives laser-focused on enhancing the economic strengths of the Commonwealth and its people.

In the TRIO and NEOA spirit of supporting low-income youth and families Jim serves as the site manager of the Mary Ann Brett Food Pantry at the Saint Teresa of Calcutta Parish in Dorchester. Jim and his wife Pattie are weekly volunteers at the pantry helping to distribute food and clothing to over 500 families. Their financial support goes well beyond their own contributions as well. At the annual St. Patrick's Day breakfast fundraiser to support the pantry, high-profile guests typically include the Governor and Lt. Governor of Massachusetts, the Mayor of Boston, Members of Congress from Massachusetts, and numerous civic, political, religious, law enforcement, business and media leaders. I am continually amazed at Jim's ability to forge together a wide array of personalities from so many sectors of society who might often disagree on politics, economics, or social issues and harness their energies (and pocketbooks) for something greater than their individual selves. Jim Brett has raised well north of one million dollars to support this pantry named for his Mother.

At a recent NEC event in Boston at the Seaport Conference Center I was part of an enthusiastic gathering of 600+ to hear remarks from Boston Mayor Michelle Wu and have a quick moment and photograph with her. My TRIO Alumna and I chose a table near the front where a frail, elderly gentleman in military attire was seated. His hand and arm tremors made it challenging to take food off his small plate, but he was assisted by a thoughtful young woman to his left. Jim Brett is always an articulate, thoughtful, humorous, and incisive moderator of these NEC events. After a few minutes into his opening remarks, he glances over to our table and offers a generous and laudatory introduction of the elderly man seated across from us. Brigadier General Enoch O'Dell 'Woody' Woodhouse is the last of the Tuskegee Airman, born in 1927 and a local resident. Also, it appeared, a long-time collaborator and friend of Jim Brett. Jim's heartfelt honorific led to a standing ovation from the crowd and a teary acknowledgment from General Woodhouse.

A short moment at a big event, but fully illustrative of the deep humanity and generous heart of Jim Brett ... a dedicated servant-leader honoring those who have given their own service, and a tireless cheerleader for the New England Region while skillfully using his friendship and role as trusted colleague of the most powerful members of our society to champion for those in need. His support for our work in TRIO and our NEOA organizational efforts are invaluable. I have to believe that Jim is an apostle of the Biblical quote paraphrased by President John F. Kennedy in 1961 ...

For of those to whom much is given, much is required

Claiborne Pell served as a US Senator from RI for 36 years. Jim tells me that receiving this award would be an honor and a significant asset for his advocacy work. I could not be more humbled and excited to nominate TRIO Alumnus and Champion James T. Brett to receive the NEOA Claiborne Pell Award for 2025 at our annual Conference *in* Rhode Island.

Submitted by,

Randall B. Schroeder

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Council for Opportunity in Education (COE ~ Board Member 2013-2017)

University of New Hampshire TRIO Programs (*retired*)

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Background Materials on the Honorable James T. Brett

National Disability Advocate

- Has advocated over 40 years for the rights of the disabled community.
- Has been Chairman of the President's Committee for People with Intellectual Disabilities, appointed by both President Obama and President Biden.
- Also appointed to the President's Committee for People with Intellectual Disabilities by President George W. Bush.
- Appointed by Speaker Nancy Pelosi to serve on the National Council on Disability.
- In Massachusetts, has been Chairman of the Governor's Commission on Intellectual Disability for the past 21 years, appointed by four governors.
- Appointed Chairman of the Disabled Persons Protection Commission (2016-present)
- Trusted disability advisor to three presidents of the United States.
- The University of Massachusetts Boston established the James T. Brett Chair in Disability and Workforce Development, the nation's only endowed chair in Disability and Workforce Development

Additional Background Sources on James. T. Brett

Staff Biography of Jim Brett, President and CEO of The New England Council (undated)
<https://www.newenglandcouncil.com/team-member/james-t-brett/>

Jim Brett, Board Member of Rodman for Kids Non-Profit Organization (undated)
<https://www.rodmanforkids.org/board-highlight-jim-brett/>

[The New England Council Advocates for Doubling Pell Grant \(March 24, 2023\)](https://www.newenglandcouncil.com/news-article/nec-again-calls-on-congress-to-double-the-pell-grant/)
<https://www.newenglandcouncil.com/news-article/nec-again-calls-on-congress-to-double-the-pell-grant/>

Article/Images: St. Patrick's Day Breakfast to Benefit Mary Ann Brett Food Pantry (March 2023 & 2024)
<https://billbrettboston.com/annual-mary-ann-brett-food-pantry-breakfast-supports-dorchester-community/>

<https://billbrettboston.com/a-packed-house-to-support-the-mary-ann-brett-food-pantry/>

Brief Video Clip of Jim Brett from the Americans with Disabilities Act 32nd Anniversary Celebration (July 2022)
<https://www.c-span.org/video/?c5063711/user-clip-james-brett-ada-anniversary>

UMass-Boston Article on the James T. Brett Chair in Disability and Workforce Development
https://www.umb.edu/news/detail/umass_boston_gala_raises_1.4_million_for_brett_chair

Boston Globe Article on the James T. Brett Chair in Disability and Workforce Development at the University of Massachusetts/Boston (September 2013)

<https://www.bostonglobe.com/opinion/2013/09/16/jim-brett-mission/uChFCXhexNU3TC4rrqIXYO/story.html?p1=BGSearch> [Advanced Results](#)

Boston Globe Article on Jim Brett and His Disabilities Activism (September 2011)

http://archive.boston.com/news/local/massachusetts/articles/2011/09/25/jim_bretts_mission_rooted_in_moms_choice_of_love_over_the_easy_path/

Jim Brett ran for Mayor of Boston in 1993. He finished a close second place in the non-partisan primary among eight candidates, but lost in the general election to Thomas Menino. Mayor Menino went on to win a total of five Boston mayoral elections.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1993_Boston_mayoral_election

<https://www.alamy.com/boston-mayor-tom-menino-l-and-james-brett-ceo-of-the-new-england-council-talk-in-front-of-reporters-before-the-boston-college-chief-executives-club-of-boston-luncheon-in-boston-massachusetts-september-25-2013-one-day-after-the-preliminary-runoff-to-elect-a-new-mayor-to-succeed-menino-who-said-he-would-not-seek-an-unprecedented-sixth-term-in-office-menino-beat-brett-in-the-1993-election-to-become-mayor-of-boston-reutersbrian-snyder-united-states-tags-politics-elections-business-image378762461.html>

Background in The Congressional Record on Upward Bound at Boston College (see page 19803 ~ July 1967)

<https://books.google.com/books?id=ETphImRN7X8C&pg=PA19803&lpg=PA19803&dq=Ulysses+Shelton,+Director+of+Upward+Bound+at+BC&source=bl&ots=BclU6gEgiS&sig=ACfU3U0DRkJ3fJS367wPrFZyqRqADUaLww&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwirrKiH3PL9AhUyFFkFHV91BOYQ6AF6BAgcEAM#v=onepage&q=Ulysses%20Shelton%2C%20Director%20of%20Upward%20Bound%20at%20BC&f=false>

Background Article on Upward Bound at Boston College (September 1966)

<https://newspapers.bc.edu/?a=d&d=bcheights19660923.2.39&e=-----en-20--1--txt-txIN----->