Willow Award

EXCELLENCE IN END-OF-LIFE CARE

3/12/2026

To the Willow Award Committee,

Our names are Mason and Samantha Pennington, and it is our honor to nominate **Dr. Sarah Peeples** for the Willow Award.

We have been married for 17 years. We were high school sweethearts who spent many years dreaming about starting a family. In 2019, after beginning infertility treatments, we also started the process of becoming an adoptive family through the Arkansas Department of Human Services. Adoption had always been on our hearts.

While we were on vacation in Colorado, riding a train through the mountains, we received a call that would change our lives forever. We were told that a baby boy had been left in the Safe Haven Baby Box in Benton, Arkansas, and that he was very sick. Thankfully, we were scheduled to head home the very next day. During that train ride, we had a conversation that new parents often have: *What should we name him?* That's when the name **Christian** came to us.

The very next day we went straight to Arkansas Children's Hospital. When we laid eyes on Christian for the first time, we knew he was meant to be our son. We were there every single day for the next month, staying with him until the hospital closed each night. Christian was eventually diagnosed with **D-bifunctional protein deficiency**, a rare condition that meant his body could not break down fatty acids. After leaving the NICU, Christian was brought home on hospice care.

Even knowing the diagnosis, I have always been a glass-half-full person. I kept saying, "He's going to beat the odds."

When Christian was about three to four months old, we had our first complex care appointment at Arkansas Children's. That is when we met **Dr. Sarah Peeples**. From the moment she walked into the room, I knew she cared—not just about Christian, but about us as well.

She talked with us about details that mattered. She explained things about Christian's condition that no one had taken the time to explain before. I was immediately impressed, but what stood out most was that before we left that very first appointment, she gave me her personal cell phone number and told me I could text her anytime. And I did. I would text her questions, concerns, or updates, and she always responded. Sometimes she would even text just to check on him.

More than anything, Dr. Peeples cared deeply about Christian's **quality of life**.

As time went on, she gently began preparing us for the reality that we might lose him. She asked us difficult questions—like where we would want him to die and what those memories might look like for us in the future. At the time, I didn't fully understand why those questions were important. Looking back now, we realize how much care and compassion was behind them.

Christian's condition continued to worsen. He would be admitted to Arkansas Children's for weeks at a time and often required intubation. Even when she wasn't assigned to his case, Dr. Peeples would occasionally stop by just to check on him.

But she wasn't only checking on Christian. She was checking on **us**.

When the time came for us to begin having conversations about end-of-life decisions, Dr. Peeples walked us through every step with incredible compassion. She even came to talk with us after finishing a shift at UAMS one afternoon. We discussed what Christian's death might look like and even the possibility of organ donation. She carefully explained the pros and cons and made sure we felt supported and informed in every decision.

He had been placed in the Safe Haven Baby Box on May 30, 2023, and his strong little body left this world on May 1, 2024. He was 11 months old.

One of the hardest moments of our lives was walking out of the hospital with our bags in our hands—but without our baby boy.

We were deeply touched when Dr. Peeples showed up at his funeral. She hugged me and told me she had been praying for our family. But what meant even more was that she continued to check on me afterward.

And after we lost Christian, Mother's Day came around. Knowing and understanding the depth of this pain, Dr. Peeples sent me a card. The fact that she thought of me during that time meant more than I can ever fully express.

Through every appointment, every hospitalization, every difficult conversation, and every precious milestone, Dr. Sarah Peeples cared not only for Christian's medical needs—but for our entire family.

She went above and beyond in ways that we never expected. She treated our son with dignity and compassion, and she treated us like people who mattered. She gave us the space to be Christian's parents and allowed us the room to make informed decisions during the hardest moments of our lives.

Now that time has passed and life has slowed down enough for us to process everything that happened, we can clearly see the lasting impact Dr. Peeples had on our family. She didn't just care for our son—she changed the way we understand grief. Because of her compassion, honesty, and presence beside us, we are able to look back on Christian's life not only with heartbreak, but with pride and gratitude.

When we think of Christian, we think of the joy and privilege of being his parents. And woven into those memories is a deep thankfulness for Dr. Peeples, who stood beside us like a trusted friend during the most sacred and difficult chapter of our lives.

For these reasons and so many more, we believe **Dr. Sarah Peeples** is profoundly deserving of the Willow Award.

With gratitude,

Mason and Samantha Pennington 🌿
Forever the parents of Christian Mason Pennington