How did you first get involved in special education?
I actually started out as an English teacher. After teaching for four years, I decided to work on my education specialist degree when my family moved to Clarksville, Tennessee where my husband was stationed as a member of the U.S. Army. While working on that degree at Austin Peay State University, I saw a tag on a bulletin board about scholarships for a doctorate in special education at Vanderbilt. I’d always been interested in special education, so I took a tag, sent for information, and here I am!

Where did your Ed.D. in special education and educational leadership take you?
We moved around a bit as a military family. I taught in Georgia and then I taught in a Department of Defense School in Germany where we were stationed. I also spent six years working as a teacher educator at Armstrong Atlantic State University in Savannah, Georgia. I loved higher ed, but it didn’t take long for me to miss the fun of working in a school system with all of its many rewards and challenges. So in 2001, I returned to the public school system where I stayed for the rest of my career.

Did you teach during those years in the public schools?
I worked primarily as the director of the Department for Exceptional Children at Georgia Southern University in Savannah. I also served a quick stint as the principal of an elementary school before I retired in 2015. I really enjoyed that and wished it was something I’d explored sooner in my career.

How do you think your administrative roles will inform your leadership of CEC?
Because I’ve had those experiences, I think I can relate to CEC members. We’re all living it, right? We all have the same objective to help students with disabilities be successful. I love that having worked as a principal, I have both the special education and the general education administrative perspective. I’ve been a practitioner, so that definitely helps with my leadership and informs my decision making.

Did your work as a principal change your thinking in any way?
Running a school was an amazing and eye-opening experience because it put me on the other side of the coin. I had pre-K through 5th grade—800 students. As a special education administrator, I’d always been in the central office advising principals about what they needed to do to resolve the issues in their schools. But then as a principal myself, I was in the hot seat. I saw how difficult it could be to implement what we in the central office thought shouldn’t be so hard. It was a great learning experience for me.

How did you first get involved with CEC?
We had a CEC chapter at Armstrong where I taught for six years. I was marginally involved there, but my real involvement began when I returned to the public school system. I was known for my love of a challenge and my willingness to volunteer for things, so a colleague asked me if I’d be willing to run for vice president of the Georgia CEC. I thought it sounded like a great opportunity, so I did. The rest is history because that turned out to be quite a long commitment. Our president unfortunately passed away, and then the president elect behind me resigned, so I ended up covering both of their terms in addition to mine. Altogether, I served for four years. Georgia’s CEC was really financially struggling at the time, and we did some innovative things that turned it around, so I’m very proud of the work we did there. I also served as president-elect, president and past president of Georgia CASE.

What are your thoughts about the challenges facing educators today and the changing political climate in Washington?
I think it’s very clear what the agenda is for this new administration, so my biggest feeling is that we need to be ready for the challenges we may face and be ready to defend the rights of our students. Perhaps we can’t dissuade them from their agenda, but we can work to inform them of how that agenda might affect students with disabilities. I hope to help CEC members see that we need to stand together. When we do a call for action, we need members to respond. There are a lot of us, so I’m hopeful we can garner some attention and have some influence over how things come down the pike.
Also, within the next six months, the U.S. Department of Education will be staffed with new leadership. We’ve got to be ready in the event the Department needs or asks for help, even if we have to push our way in. Sometimes a train is driving forward and you can’t stop it. But maybe you can get on it in some way and take advantage of any opportunities that come along. The most important thing: you have to be ready!

What are you hoping to accomplish during your year as president?
A year is not a very long time and goes by very quickly. Special education is facing some uncertainty with our new presidential administration. I hope that during this year I can help to deliver the message that we need to unite as a profession and be ready for the advocacy work required to defend the rights of children with disabilities and their families. I want to promote the mission of CEC as a professional organization that will support our profession through advocacy, standards, and professional development. I also want our members to understand that CEC is there for them as a resource and as a support.

Any last thoughts for our members?
I’m so honored to be president, and I feel very privileged to represent our profession in this way. I hope members know that I take it very seriously—and even though I’m still involved with my special education work in Georgia, I’m glad I’ve retired so I have the time to really focus and do the best job I can!

Mikki Garcia Fast Facts
Current position: Retired administrator, educational consultant, IEP facilitator and complaint investigator for the state of Georgia
Years as a CEC member: 15
First job: High school English teacher
Primary job: Special education administrator
Career focus: Create better working conditions for teachers. Promote and improve inclusive practices.
Leadership/service positions: Chairman of Georgia State Advisory Panel for special education, President of Georgia CEC, President of Georgia CASE, Member-at-Large for CEC Board of Directors
Personal interests: Faith and church, spending time with my four grandchildren, traveling, bike riding