

MANSFIELD TRAINING SCHOOL IS CLOSED

This address was made at the closing ceremony on Saturday, April 24, 1993

By: Robert Perske

Fifteen years ago, on December 6, 1978, a volunteer organization sued the State of Connecticut. In a class-action suit, known as CARC versus Thorne, the volunteers sued the state for the way it perceived and treated some persons with developmental disabilities.

**The state saw some of these persons as burdens in their own neighborhoods.
The state saw them as needing programs the community could not provide.
The state sent them away to live at Mansfield Training School.**

For most of those fifteen years, the Connecticut Association for Retarded Citizens –now knows as The Arc of Connecticut – engaged itself in a battle that tested whether these citizens belonged in a segregated setting like Mansfield or in the community.

During that period, The Arc utilized the talents of its 21 local chapters with 3000 members. It used the volunteer services of seven state presidents (Luella Horan, Quincy Abbot, David Warde, Barry Bosworth, Mickey Herbst, Diane Aubin and myself). Two tenacious executive directors (Tom Nerney and Peg Dignoti) kept us together – always moving forward. We were represented by three of the most principled and committed lawyers I have ever met in my life (David Shaw, Frank Laski and Tom Gilhool).

The lawsuit represented:

**14 named plaintiffs,
859 persons residing at Mansfield,
839 persons Mansfield sent to nursing homes,
and numerous persons still at risk of being sent to the institution.**

Today the battle ends. Mansfield Training School is closed.

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Please forgive us for failing to feel sad or nostalgic when we think about this place. Instead, we remember the agony of the parents that The Arc represented. For them, Mansfield was the only alternative the State of Connecticut offered them. For them, it was Mansfield – take it or suffer alone.

We remember the Department of Mental Retardation's budget: Eighty percent went for operating institutions. Only 20 percent went for helping persons to live in their own communities.

We remember the photographs of Mansfield that were taken by the United States Department of Justice.

Some showed as many as 20 adults in diapers lying together on one vinyl-covered mat. Some showed twisted legs and arms due to the lack of physical therapy. Other photos showed people shackled to wooden chairs with leg, arm and waist restraints.

There were people sitting in long lines in day rooms.

Some stared endlessly into space.

Some slumped over in sleep.

Others slept on the floor.

Photographs showed gang showers and rows of toilets with no partitions.

Some toilets had no seats.

I will never forget one photo showing a little child sleeping under a stainless steel bathing slab -- the same kind one usually finds in a funeral home.

We remember parents pitted against parents. Some went through hell before deciding to send their child to the institution. Then came the lawsuit. Others went through hell trying to keep their child out of Mansfield. They longed for community services and supports.

We remember battles between the class and the labor union. District 1199 of the New England Health Care Employees Union fought for their jobs. The class, on the other hand, fought for *The Constitutional Rights* of the residents over those fighting to keep their jobs.

We remember battles between some parents and their adult sons and daughters. Some parents wanted their children to stay put – for life. But the sons and daughters wanted to move into the community.

We remember Judge F. Owen Egan's 116 page (Findings of Fact and Conclusions of Law.) He found

That the institutional environment was destructive (64).

That there were environments "devoid of potential for meaningful human activity" (65).

That physical restraints were used to control clients as a substitute for programs (68).

That many residents were denied their privacy and basic human dignity (73).

That residents were routinely restricted-- even locked up -- and their daily activities regulated in conformity with institutional routine (74).

That even while the litigation was pending, 22 Mansfield employees faced administrative action for abusing residents. Four were prosecuted (76).

All in all, his findings reflected the bleakness and the idleness of the place – as well as its terrible odors of urine and feces in many of the buildings.

On the other hand, it was Judge Egan who brought the battling parties together. He allowed his court to be a learning place. He got the many parties talking to one another. Thanks to him, all parties (except for the union) came together and signed a consent decree.

Thanks to the consent decree, the tenacity of The Arc (led for most of those years by Peg Dignoti), and two new DMR commissioners (Brian Lensink and Toni Richardson), we see people with disabilities living full lives in our own neighborhoods. We see them working. We see them shopping. We see them in restaurants. We see them volunteering for good

causes. We see them paying taxes. We even see those with multiple disabilities in regular classrooms with circles of so-called normal students as their friends.

We see new technologies like facilitated communication – showing vividly that the true intelligence of some people far surpasses the labels and IQ numbers we laid on them according to the wisdom of an earlier age.

We are aware of a powerful grassroots movement of persons with disabilities and so-called normals called The Inclusion Movement.

Most importantly we watch people who once lived in institutions now organizing as People First of Connecticut. When they lived in institutions we spoke for them. Now that these self-advocates live in the community, they insist on speaking for themselves. They are doing it with the governor, with legislators, at town council meetings and in their own neighborhoods.

All these breakthroughs show that the state has indeed changed its perceptions of persons with development disabilities.

So Mansfield closes – but another remains open. Southbury Training School is a segregated institution like Mansfield. There are 910 souls living there. Southbury has an operating budget of 65 million dollars – not counting capital improvements and property values.

Must we go through 15 more anguishing years? Or will our new perceptions move us to do things differently? Can the parties come together again? Can they study this situation and come up with a plan more quickly?

While working in Australia, I observed how the State of Victoria closed one of its institutions. The state sold the property and used the proceeds to pay for the housing and support in the community for all its residents for better than ten years.

Could that work here? With our fresh perceptions and supports, surely we can do something better than we ever did before.

But no matter what we do, People First of Connecticut will be involved. I'm sure of it. They may even take leadership.

So, today, we say goodbye to Mansfield, and we say hello to a richer life in regular neighborhoods.