

As I think back over the last seven years of working with the Campaign for Real Choice, I can't believe what I learned, who I learned it from, what we did, and how it was received. In 2003, Lester served on the planning committee to develop the old grounds of Lincoln Developmental Center. I kind of twisted his arm to be on this committee. Lincoln hit a very deep chord in Lester since his parents were told to put him in a "nice home" (which was another term for an institution). "Forget about him and go home and make other babies" the doctor said. We owe so much to his parents for not following the doctor's advice in 1949. Lester was always sensitive to the fact that he could have been a resident of one of our state institutions. This bothered him to his core and made him a strong advocate for those that couldn't speak or didn't feel that they had a voice. He said to me, "If I'm going to be on this committee, you're going to be on it too and you can re-voice for me."

We then traveled around to different Centers for Independent Living, sharing our concerns and Lester's vision for changes in Illinois. We also talked with parents of kids with significant disabilities who we had met over the years. Lester wanted to get a sense of what these parents wanted for their children. We did a lot of research to see what other states had done for individuals with significant disabilities. Lester digested numerous state and federal reports and would give me a summarized version in which he concluded, as did many reports, that the community should allow individuals to be safe and integrated, leading a happy and well-supported life in a place the individuals wanted to live. The struggle was "how do we get from where we are in Illinois to where we need to be in comparison to other states?"

Lester concluded that creating an organization which offered folks an opportunity to make changes in the state while having a voice in the process was something we could and should try to do. Shifting the balance of power from the state officials to the disability community and supporting individuals in achieving their dreams were areas in which the Campaign could make a positive difference. We began to pull people together around the issue of the Lincoln Developmental Center by creating opportunities within the existing meetings for individuals to state their concerns. I was so surprised that people came. They talked at meetings open to the public. They came to rallies and protests and questioned the officials working on the future of the LDC land. Individuals with disabilities objected to the answers that they were given. I began to see the power of the people and how a small group could really make a difference. We delayed the opening of Lincoln sufficiently enough that the state could not reopen the institution. We were one of many groups who had a voice in this process and helped get the disability community's opinion across to the decision makers.

I remember when we had people within the disability community have the chance to experience a bit of what it might be like to be in an institution through our dramatizations at the Liberty Launch events. People really understood how dehumanizing this could be. I then began to hear others speak about changing

the lives of folks in institutions. When Sarah Triano said that a large number of people at Howe Developmental Center had died for lack of good care, people immediately understood that this was an abomination and we needed to take on this institution as well. It was a long struggle but I saw the disability community coming together and feeling more confident because we had some areas of unity across disability groups. This was new for our community and I was pleased and proud of everyone's efforts last June when Howe closed.

The work of the Campaign gave a voice to the disability community and to many of those in the community whose opinions had never before been heard. For example, on the Freedom Ride in 2005, two riders told us they could never speak in front of an audience. On our third day, both of those riders got up and told their own stories in front of a crowd in Galesburg. Lester and I were so proud that they had found their own voices. They were able to tell the audience for the first time what their life in the community meant to them. One of these individuals had lived in an institution and was happy she was now in her own apartment, leading the life she wanted. I am now a true believer that it is beyond time for these individuals to have their voices and needs be heard and clearly understood.

The work of the Campaign has reinforced in me that individuals have power in numbers and in telling their stories. For the foreseeable future, I plan to continue working on issues within the disability community on local, state, and national levels. The Campaign may be ending, but I am looking forward to a future that will bring needed changes to our state for people with disabilities. The individuals I have worked with in the last 7 years have taught me so much. Most importantly, that the power of people working together can, has, and will continue to change the world in which we live.