

My Tribute to Lester and the Campaign for Real Choice - Sarah

I don't know that I could ever explain in words the impact Lester Pritchard and the Campaign for Real Choice in Illinois had on my life and my view of the world, but this is certainly my attempt to try...

I remember my first meeting with Lester. He brought his amazing sidekick, Jennifer, and I was so nervous; I didn't know what to expect and honestly I was surprised by his enlightened perspective and explanation of the goals and mission of the Campaign for Real Choice. I may have thought it was overly ambitious and I think I was a bit nervous, I didn't want to get arrested...that's all I remember thinking, but I loved Jen and Lester from the start. I thought it was easy to get behind the Campaign's goal to close institutions, even though I don't really know if I understood what that really meant and I never could have guessed what was to follow.

I started with the Campaign in the middle of the Close Howe Now "project". Developmental Disability institution...kills people and wastes tax dollars...what??? Not possible right...well unfortunately it was and it is (please insert eye roll and blood pressure increase). I was astonished at this world I had never personally experienced and known. For you see, although I have a physical disability, developmental disabilities had been off my radar and sadly I had considered myself to be a disability rights advocate, but really I was a physical disability rights advocate. I mean how could I be a disability rights advocate if I hadn't heard of the atrocities that existed and unfortunately still do exist with other disability groups? I think deep down Lester understood this, although he never said it to me. I think he saw an opportunity to bring me into the developmental disability world both to help me see the reality of disability rights and gain perspective about what I wanted to do as a disability rights advocate.

Instantly I felt at home...maybe because we worked out of the Pritchard home which always smelled of something delicious that Barb had cooking in the kitchen, but also because the Campaign became family. Lester, Jen, Barb, and I would drive up to Chicagoland for meetings about our community efforts to close Howe. The ride up usually involved some kind of planning session (regardless of the hour) and the ride back consisted of a bit of venting and decompression time, and of course some random question posed by me...a kind of curve ball no one expected...for example "what would you choose to eat if you had to eat the same meals every day for the rest of your life?" I remember Jen and Lester laughing hysterically at my choice that had to include canned peaches...yes that's right...canned peaches!

While I don't think Howe brought much to this world (and witnessing the hearings about moving for closure was one of the worst experiences of my life), Howe did bring something positive to my life. It brought me my Campaign family!

Lester was a visionary, something I hope to emulate someday. He was a man with an agenda, and normally I wouldn't say that's a good thing, but in his case, my goodness I believed he could change the world, and honestly I believe he did.

Before I left the Campaign, we had Freedom Quest '09. Jen and I will attest to the fact that it was difficult to plan, but amazing to be a part of and amazing to witness, and seriously I think it all stemmed from Lester's incredible vision. Who would have thought that we could bring disability groups from around Illinois together to support one message, even when their individual messages did not match up?? LESTER, that's who!!

Lester presented this idea of a Freedom Ride to us early on in the year and at first I thought he was crazy. When he said that he wanted me to lead up the efforts...I thought he was even crazier! I think he picked me because I have a strange obsession with binders and he knew that everyone would get a folder/binder with all of the logistics that may have accounted for everything but a hurricane (which thankfully in Illinois was unlikely). But Lester was a man with a plan and bringing the Campaign together with Illinois Voices was a way to get our message out and to bring our visionary's goals to fruition.

Lester had us driving all over the state to plan Freedom Quest '09...some days Jen and I would be in our cars upwards of eight hours! I got used to dinner from a sack and repeat radio. But honestly what I miss most are my long car rides with Jen where we would ponder the deeper meaning of life, or the importance of interviewing using a valley girl dialect...just smile and nod...

Freedom Quest '09 was one of the most amazing experiences of my life. Watching it all come together was like watching my baby grow up and go off to school...I was proud. I wasn't really proud that we pulled it off...although I was excited about that. I was proud because we were able to show Lester his vision in a way that he could be proud of. We were able to bring people together. We were able to change the way people perceive things. We were able to make a difference.

I don't know if I will ever be able to see the world as Lester did and I don't know if I will ever be able to bring about the change that he did. But I know what it looks like to have passion and desire to change the world you know and see. I know what it means to have a goal and a means to achieve it. I know what its like to fail, but to keep on going. I know what it's like to find family in friends and to find hope in those people. I know what its like not just to want more, but to want to work for more. I know what its like to have the best job in the world...and I think I have Lester to thank for that.

The Campaign for Real Choice in Illinois changed my world and I will forever be indebted to Lester, Barb, Jen, and the Campaign for all they gave to me. Everyone from my Campaign family will forever be in my heart and I hope to make you proud someday.