

Life Remembered: Pritchard fought for disabled's rights

By [Julie Wurth](#)

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CHICAGO – When hundreds of disability rights activists converged on Chicago a couple of years ago, Lester Pritchard was in the thick of it.

He and other advocates wedged their wheelchairs in the revolving doors of the Thompson Center's three entrances, demanding then-Gov. Rod Blagojevich drop his plan to reopen Lincoln Developmental Center. They gained a meeting with the governor's chief of staff and, eventually, a promise to shut down the state institution for good.

It was one of the many battles Mr. Pritchard waged – and won – in his persistent fight for independence for those with disabilities.

Mr. Pritchard, an Urbana resident and chairman of the Illinois Council on Developmental Disabilities, died Monday after becoming ill about a week earlier, friends said.

"He's been an incredible asset to the disability community. Truthfully, I don't know how we'll manage without him," said close friend and fellow activist Vicki Niswander of Mahomet.

Mr. Pritchard had cerebral palsy, which affected his speech and kept him in a wheelchair, but he was a frequent public speaker. His wife, Barbara, or his personal assistant would often "revoice" his speeches or interviews, but his passion came through.



Lester Pritchard receives an award from Champaign County Board Chairman C. Pius Weibel at the launch of Martin Luther King Jr. Celebration Week 2007.

"The message was what was most important to him," Niswander said.

Lester and Barbara Pritchard, who is visually impaired, co-founded the Campaign for Real Choice, dedicated to "full inclusion" for people with disabilities. They pushed the state to fund community-based services that allow people with disabilities to live in their own homes, not institutions or group homes. They had the resources to buy an accessible home in southeast Urbana and wanted others to enjoy that independence.

Barbara Pritchard described her husband as a man who wrapped humor and laughter into everything he did.

"He was able to pull out the best in people, and they pulled out the best in him," she said.

Barbara Pritchard said she met her future husband when he was on the board for the local center for independent living, and she was on its staff.

"He asked me to lead a support group for people with disabilities in 1987, and I said no," she recalled. "He asked if I would do it if they paid me, and I said yes.

"Lester kept calling me and talking to me about the support group. It wasn't until he took me out to dinner at a very nice restaurant to talk about the support group that I realized we were having a date. A little over two years later, we were married."

Barbara Pritchard said her husband worked hard to make the most of everybody's talents.

"Lester had the inspiration and talent to pull people together," she said. "The Campaign for Real Choice was a bridge to bring a lot of different organizations together for a common cause."

"Lester had a real vision for what society should be, but he never lost sight of working with individuals to make sure their needs were met," added Sheila Romano, executive director of Developmental Disabilities Council. "He inspired so many people."

In 2008, the disabilities council, a federally funded agency charged with ensuring equal rights for those with disabilities, issued a seven-year plan for reform called, "A Blueprint for System Redesign in Illinois." Mr. Pritchard was thrilled by a landmark settlement in which the state agreed to help those with disabilities move out of institutions.

He met frequently with Peter Tracy, executive director of the Champaign County Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities boards. Mr. Pritchard wanted to ensure that policymakers considered the views of those with disabilities, Tracy said.

"He was at the forefront," Tracy said. "He would challenge anybody on anything. He was not afraid."

The two first met when Mr. Pritchard showed up at a mental health board meeting in Rantoul on a frigid, snowy night about 12 years ago.

"I didn't even want to be out that night, but there was Lester," Tracy said. "He never let his disabilities stop him from doing what needed to be done.

"Lester was just an incredible person. He had such perseverance, and he was so bright and knowledgeable," Tracy said. He said Mr. Pritchard taught him that "regardless of how disabled a person is, they have hopes, and they have dreams, and they need to be given the opportunities to pursue those dreams and to live the way they want to live."

Mr. Pritchard was known nationally for his advocacy work, flying to New York last year to receive the American Bar Association's Paul G. Hearne Award for Disability Rights.

In 2007, the Champaign County Board awarded him the James R. Burgess Sr. Humanitarian Award for furthering civil rights. Mr. Pritchard also served on the Urbana Human Relations Commission.

The Pritchards founded a local housing group in 1997 called Citizens for HOMES – Housing Options Meeting Equitable Standards – to promote low-cost accessible features in new housing.

"Lester was a true visionary in my mind. He had a way of dealing with people that helped them to understand better what was necessary to make life more equitable for people with disabilities," Niswander said.

Her daughter has Down syndrome, and Mr. Pritchard helped her write a "life future plan" she is now living – volunteering at the Humane Society and local schools, attending a book club, taking a class at Parkland College and working out three days a week.

"A lot of that has come from the way Lester helped us think about what her life could be like," Niswander said.

Niswander, who had been in Michigan over the weekend, raced back to Champaign-Urbana on Sunday when she got word of the gravity of Mr. Pritchard's condition.

"I told him, 'I don't know how we're going to be able to continue the work that you've done,'" she said. "There's so much to be done yet."

Staff writer Tim Mitchell contributed to this story.