

I came out of grad school the summer of 2009 with the goal of working for and under a strong organizer with a passion for social justice...someone that I could learn from and be mentored by for years. I knew that I wasn't ready to be off on my own trying to save the world. I was still a rookie organizer and needed plenty of guidance, and I was looking for a leader that I could follow. I was also tired of bouncing from one non-profit job to another, which I had been doing for the last decade, and I was ready to really sink my teeth into an organization and an issue for the long haul.

So when Lester asked me to come work for the Campaign for Real Choice in Illinois, I felt like I had hit the jackpot. Here was exactly the type of leader and organization that I was looking for. I had never organized people with disabilities and knew next to nothing about disability rights, but I quickly recognized the type of mentor that Lester could be for me and the potential to do amazing and powerful work with the Campaign. Plus, I could tell it was going to be a lot of fun. I'll never forget my first day, when I walked in the door of the Pritchard's home and Lester greeted me by saying, "I'm so glad you didn't wear that tie you had on at the interview...I was worried we had made a bad decision hiring you." After we had a few laughs, we got right down to work.

Unfortunately, nothing really seemed to work out like we had planned. When Lester passed away just two months after starting to work for the Campaign, I was crushed...to say the least. I mourned the loss of the hundreds if not thousands who knew Lester and were impacted by him in so many ways. I was sad for those who lost their passionate leader and great friend. But I could not really mourn the loss of Lester, only the idea of him. I felt incredible disappointment that I didn't get to witness and experience all of the qualities that made Lester the extraordinary activist who seemed to have moved mountains in his lifetime. In the weeks and months that followed his death I heard countless stories from those who knew Lester about his powerful speeches, unwavering vision, and contagious sense of humor, and felt as if I had the opportunity of a lifetime stolen from me.

In the weeks prior to Lester's death, we had been gearing up for a campaign that he envisioned would have wide and deep impacts on the legislative process and how disability services are structured in Illinois. I truly believe that had his vision been brought to fruition, we would've prevented some of the financial crises that are affecting the state and disability community today. But his life and our work together was cruelly cut short, and the Campaign, his comrades, and the disability community has still not fully recovered.

Barb and I, along with a large cast of supporters, did our best to piece back together the Campaign into some semblance of Lester's vision, knowing all the while that we would never be able to achieve his level of brilliance. But to our credit and his legacy, I believe we still did some pretty amazing and powerful work.

I feel truly honored and blessed to have had the opportunity to work for the Campaign under the memory of Lester and alongside a dedicated, compassionate, and enthusiastic advocate like Barb. Though it took us some time, we eventually found our stride and

restored the Campaign to something that may not have been part of Lester's vision (and really...how could we?), but still managed to work for us and fit with the Campaign's mission and principles. We weren't the great leader that the Campaign was when Lester was at the helm, but I think we still managed to kick some ass and always celebrated the joy of a good fight.

While I can't say for sure if the post-Lester Campaign for Real Choice has made concrete improvements in people's lives (although I like to believe we have), I know that my experiences with the Campaign will have lasting effects on my own life and my work moving forward as an organizer. The knowledge of disability rights and services, the experience of co-leading an organization and coalition, and the confidence to find my own voice and strengths among so many strong advocates and activists that I have had the pleasure to work with over the last two years will guide me throughout my life and career.

I try not to think too much about "what could've been" and just appreciate what was. The Campaign for Real Choice was a force in Illinois, and I am honored to have been a part of it. Thank you Lester for taking a chance on me, I'll spend my life trying to become half the leader and organizer you were...and I'll do it all without that tie. Thank you Barb for continuing to take a chance on me, even in your darkest times you always kept your eyes on the prize and I hope I provided enough support along the way.

In solidarity - Nick