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PHIL KADNER ::

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Bullies, cowards and those who fight

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April 10, 2009

BY PHIL KADNER

When I was in high school, I used to watch Bob getting picked on by bullies.

Bob had a developmental disability. We called him mentally retarded back then.

I did nothing to help him.

That's bothered me my entire life. Only cowards walk away when the "Bobs" of the world are being threatened.

There was a public uproar when President Barack Obama compared his bowling skills to those of a Special Olympics athlete. But when it comes to actually helping mentally disabled adults, there is nothing but silence.

I recently wrote a column about two Southland mothers so alarmed by the lack of state support for the developmentally disabled that they have launched their own fundraising organization, Bridge2Hope.

They realize the amount of money they raise won't come close to meeting the statewide demand, but they figured it was better to light a candle than curse the darkness.

Anne O'Sullivan, of Oak Lawn, and Stephanie DeWitt-Kotheimer, of Tinley Park, have adult children of their own in need of assistance, but there are roughly 16,000 other people on the same waiting list for help.

After I wrote about Bridge2Hope, an effort to raise awareness as well as money, I received an e-mail from Linda Hayes, program director for LARC in Lansing, a not-for-profit organization dedicated to providing developmentally disabled adults with "an opportunity to work, live and participate in their community."

Originally formed as a school for mentally retarded children in 1956, LARC currently provides day training and work activity to approximately 90 adults from the Southland and Northwest Indiana.

Hayes wrote because she wanted me to know that the challenges faced by the children of those two Moms - Meggin Kotheimer, 20, and Harry O'Sullivan, 18 - are indicative of a much larger problem.

"We are the place that young people like Harry and Meggin would be able to attend upon graduation (from high school)," Hayes wrote. "Up until about two years ago, when graduation was approaching, Harry and Meggin's families would have contacted the appropriate organizations and inquired about availability.

"Our agency would have been contacted, and we would have placed them on our waiting list. When they graduated, we would have reviewed their status and, more than likely, accepted them into our program.

"Our program provides work and many other necessary programs for adults with disabilities. But now, there is no funding, so we no longer can accept special education graduates. We understand that there is a five-year wait from the time of graduation.

"The fact that Mrs. O'Sullivan and Mrs. DeWitt-Kotheimer are forced to raise money for programs for people with developmental disabilities, when other states manage just fine, is very bad. All they want for their children is a place to go each day ... to be productive, to make friends, to continue to learn.

"There are many places that would fulfill these needs right in the South Suburbs. But no funding means no place to go. No funding means no transportation. No funding means no services. And these two caring, loving parents must do the state's job.

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"I was not outraged by President Obama's comments about the Special Olympics. In fact, I welcomed the opportunity to at least have that organization mentioned and get some publicity. No one usually even hears about Special Olympics, let alone people with disabilities.

"There should be absolute outrage that in the year 2009, adults with disabilities are once again being treated as second-class, maybe even third-class, citizens. They are ignored and left unserved. These facts rarely make the news."

I thanked Hayes for her e-mail because I think it gets to the heart of the problem.

Parents such as O'Sullivan and Dewitt-Kotheimer just want to care for their children at home, while giving them the opportunity to live as normal a life as possible.

In doing so, they actually save the government hundreds of thousands of dollars, the cost of housing the developmentally disabled in a group home or institution.

When Obama compared his bowling skills to those of a Special Olympian, millions of Americans spoke up as if they cared. But if they did, this state wouldn't be among the worst, if not the worst, in the nation when it comes to offering programs for developmentally disabled adults.

O'Sullivan told me she was faced with the choice of leaving the state or staying here and launching a fight to improve funding for individuals in the same situation as her own child.

There are bullies who pick on those who are weak.

And there are cowards who walk away when they see that happening.

These two Moms have told you what's going on. If you turn away, pretend you don't see it, well, that's what I did with Bob.

I know what that is. So do you.

Phil Kadner can be reached at pkadner@southtownstar.com or (708) 633-6787.

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jerjorju wrote:

Mr. Kader This is thought provoking. Thank you. Just a little aside. I'm glad you didn't get outraged about Mr. Obama's comment about the Special Olympics. I watched the Tonight Show when he was on. He wasn't comparing himself to a Special Olympics athlete. He realized that Jay Leno was kind of poking fun of his bowling accomplishment. He was just saying in essence: Oh you are comparing my improved bowling skills to someone praising an Special Olympians accomplishment when actually it pales to a typical athlete. Mr. Obama was actually acknowledging that Mr. Leno was making fun of him. I think he took it well. I have two sons who participate in Special Olympics. I was not offended at all.

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blueforil wrote:

Also here's a video that really puts the R-Word into context...
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x8QRiNqksk8&feature=channel_page

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blueforil wrote:

There is a plan that would reform Illinois archaic system into one that actually best serves citizens with developmental disabilities! Check



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out a video about the plan at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nDnlealDScM&feature=channel_page

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closehowe wrote:

This gets to the heart of what is wrong with Illinois' system- there are not enough community options for people with developmental disabilities. Even worse, the state continues to fund failed, expensive institutions like Howe Developmental Center in Tinley Park.. despite the unnaturally high death rate and firsthand allegations of abuse from former residents who have actually lived there.. view here:

<http://www.youtube.com/CloseHowe>

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