



May 9, 2018

Dear Friend of Advocacy Network,

The most recent newsletter you received from us was in 2012, and you may well have been wondering where we've been. With very mixed feelings, I am writing to inform you that, after 64 years of devoted service to our family members and others afflicted with developmental disabilities, Advocacy Network is officially dissolving as an organization.

A bit of history is in order.

Originally established in 1954 as the Belchertown State School Friends Association, we incorporated as Advocacy Network in 1992. In 1972, under the leadership of the late Dr. Benjamin Ricci and Attorney Beryl Cohen, the Belchertown State School Friends Association initiated a successful battle in U.S. Federal Court in Boston to force improvements in care for the state's citizens served by what was then called the Massachusetts Department of Mental Retardation.

The resulting Consent Decree issued by Judge Joseph L. Tauro in this landmark class action included creation of the Individual Service Plan (ISP), a legally binding process that provides input from family members and guardians in the care of their loved ones. Judge Tauro continued his oversight of *Ricci v. Greenblatt* for twenty years.

Last year marked the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the closing of Belchertown State School. On December 31, 1992, I attended the closing ceremony in front of the Administration Building. I'm certain that Ben Ricci also had mixed feelings on that cold day, as the main entrance door was locked forever. It was at the top of the stairs where he and his wife Virginia had brought their six-year-old son Bobby for admittance in 1953.

Ben Ricci passed away in 2006, two years after he had published his book, *Crimes Against Humanity* [iUniverse, Inc. 2004], a chronicle of the lawsuit. It was at one of Ben's book signings at Holyoke Community College that I met Donald Vitkus, a 62-year-old Human Services student, who would eventually become Vice-President of Advocacy Network. Donald told me that, like Bobby Ricci, he had also grown up at Belchertown, and was looking for someone to



write his story. The result was publication of “*You’ll like it here,*” *The Story of Donald Vitkus—Belchertown Patient #3394* [Levellers Press, 2016].

After the closing of Belchertown, we continued our mission of promoting and protecting the health, human rights, and safety of our relatives and friends who are impaired by developmental disabilities. We re-affiliated with COFAR, our sister non-profit organization that was among the original plaintiffs in the 1972 lawsuit, and joined forces with VOR, a national advocacy group whose representatives meet annually in Washington, D.C., to lobby for Congressional legislation to support our cause. We responded to calls from confused and overwhelmed parents and guardians to help them navigate the bureaucracy of the Massachusetts Department of Developmental Services. Our board members served on numerous Human Rights committees and intervened on behalf of parents and guardians to help assure that Individual Service Plans for their loved ones are properly executed. We fought to restore funding to the Belchertown Carousel Trust Fund when the Massachusetts legislature raided that account. The carousel fund remains intact, and we will continue to monitor its existence.

As we close out our books, we want to assure you that your financial support over the years will continue to serve the intellectually disabled. We have made a substantial donation to COFAR, to continue our legacy of advocacy. We have made a scholarship contribution to Holyoke Community College, preferably to a Human Services students, in memory of Donald Vitkus. In addition, Advocacy Network has made sizeable donations to the following Massachusetts non-profit agencies that support individuals with special needs:

- Kehillah, a special needs program of the Jewish Community Center, Springfield
- Whole Children, a recreational and social enrichment program, Hadley
- JERICHO, the Bureau for Exceptional Children and Adults, Holyoke
- Berkshire Meadows, Great Barrington

If you need to contact us, for the immediate future, we will maintain the following:

E-mail address: [adnetnews@comcast.net](mailto:adnetnews@comcast.net)

Website: [www.theadvocacynetwork.org](http://www.theadvocacynetwork.org)

Facebook: Advocacy Network, Inc.

U.S. mail: P.O. Box 2071, Amherst MA 01004-2071

For further information or assistance, please visit [www.cofar.org](http://www.cofar.org) .

Before we disband, you are cordially invited to attend two final Advocacy Network events. On Thursday, May 24, at 3:30 p.m., we will be participating in the annual Memorial Service conducted by DDS at the Warner-Pine Grove Cemetery, off Route 21 in Belchertown, on



property of the former Belchertown State School. *Ricci Class* members who have passed away during the preceding year will be honored.

Then, on Saturday, June 23, at 2:30 p.m., we will conduct a special memorial service for our Vice-President, Donald Vitkus, who passed away on January 24 of this year. Also at the Warner-Pine Grove Cemetery, this will be the only burial to have occurred at what used to be called “Turkey Hill” since 2009. Massachusetts Governor Charlie Baker has granted approval to the Vitkus family, and DDS Commissioner Jane Ryder is scheduled to attend.

Donald was admitted to Belchertown State School in 1949 at age six, and was discharged as a patient in 1960, as he was about to turn 18. At age 62, he earned a degree in Human Services and became a compassionate caregiver for the developmentally disabled. Before his passing, Donald had requested to be buried at this location “...because those are my brothers and sisters.”

Finally, on behalf of all our family members and friends who have been touched by developmental disabilities, thank you for your support! Ben Ricci took pride in saying that Advocacy Network has always been an all-volunteer organization. We have never had any paid staff or officers. Your membership dues and donations made it possible for us to carry out our mission for the past 64 years.

I close with Ben Ricci’s signature farewell—Keep the Faith!

Sincerely,

Ed Orzechowski,  
President, Advocacy Network