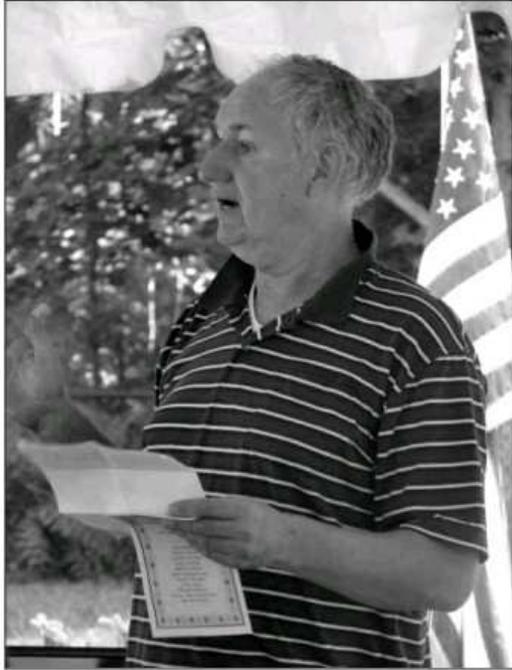


## Ceremony retells ex-school's past

Story taken from MASS.LIVE.com, The Republican



Donald E. Vitkus, a former resident of Belchertown State School

BELCHERTOWN - Donald E. Vitkus left Belchertown State School 47 years ago but feels the need to remind people today about the mistreatment that went on there, the lies and the curtailment of residents' freedom.

"What I do is remind people of what it was, so we never go back there," Vitkus said yesterday during the annual memorial service at Warner Pine Grove Cemetery, where for decades residents who died at the school were buried.

Vitkus recalled people dying with no family close.

He recalled the irony of having residents who worked on the Belchertown State School farm dig the graves when other residents died but also the Orwellian decision to tell other residents that the deceased had somehow just gone away.

"Nobody ever died at the state school," Vitkus said.

And then he told about the time in his early teens, when he would have died there if he could have. He had been off to a camp in Chesterfield for a brief time and when he

returned he said he was suicidal and despondent after having tasted a small bit of freedom before having to go back to the restricted life at the state school.

Vitkus said his sister and he were abandoned by his mother, who signed them over to the state, only to have the state abandon them to an institution judged to be inhumane before the reforms of the 1970s and the eventual closing in 1992.

"They thought I was a moron," said Vitkus.

Since leaving Belchertown State School, Vitkus said he has worked hard to prove he was not retarded, served in the Army in Vietnam, worked 30 years in a factory, married, raised a family - he has two children and four grandchildren - earned a high school degree and started working on a book.

Teresa L. O'Hare, regional director of the state Department of Mental Retardation, thanked Vitkus for his remarks at the ceremony.

"It does help us to never forget," O'Hare said.

She also spoke of Albert Warner, a former resident who was instrumental in getting the cemetery cleaned up and supplied with grave markers with the residents' names, rather than the numbers originally used there.

The cemetery has been renamed for Warner.

State Rep. Thomas M. Petrolati, D-Ludlow, commended O'Hare and other Department of Mental Retardation employees and the volunteers who conduct the annual remembrance service at Warner Pine Grove Cemetery. "I commend you for keeping the spirit alive of every individual who is buried here," Petrolati said.

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