

Content notes: institutionalization, abuse

## We Can't Go Back

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My name is Ricardo Thornton. I am here representing the ninety-two thousand people who are still living in institutions and large public and private facilities for people with intellectual disabilities—and for all of the people, like me, who used to live in an institution. With me today is my wife, Donna, and my son, Ricky.

I lived in institutions all of my childhood. I was first a resident of D.C. Village and then in 1966 I went to Forest Haven, D.C.'s institution for people with intellectual disabilities. My wife, brother, and sister also lived at Forest Haven. For many years, no one told me that I had a brother and sister. We weren't told that we were related. In the institution, I didn't get to think for myself. The staff thought for me and made all of my decisions. For a long time, no one expected any-



thing of me. I got to know some good staff and some really bad staff. I witnessed abuse, especially of people with severe disabilities. My mother died in Forest Haven. She is buried at Forest Haven, and I still go back to visit her grave. I promised to advocate on her behalf and on behalf of others who cannot speak for themselves.

I left Forest Haven in 1980 when I was in my early twenties. That was a great day! I was in the first group to go out. I lived in a few different group homes. Living in the community was a big adjustment. Some people looked at us differently. The community didn't want us there. There was trash in the alley and the neighbors thought we put it there until they saw that we were there cleaning it up.

At first, in the group homes, people treated us in some of the same ways as when we were in the institution. I wanted my own bank account, but staff didn't want me to manage my own money, so I got in trouble.

While I was living in a group home I started to date Donna—and then she proposed to me. People didn't think we should get married, but a few people encouraged and believed in us. So we got married and invited everyone we knew to the wedding. Later, we had a beautiful baby boy, our son, Ricky, two pounds eleven ounces. We are very proud of Ricky. He graduated from high school, took a few college courses, is now working part-time, is married, and is the father of three children. We were written up in *The Washington Post* and got to be on *60 Minutes*.

When I lived in the institution, no one would have believed that I could have the life I have today—married with a son and grandchildren, a good job for thirty-five years, a driver's license and car, and opportunities to speak on behalf of Special Olympics International, Project ACTION!, and other advocacy organizations, which has taken me to places like Johannesburg and Alaska and across the country.

It's important to have people believe in you and to expect that

you are going to succeed. People need to have high expectations for people with disabilities because then they'll give them opportunities to learn and grow. People don't grow in places like Forest Haven and in other institutions.

I have been working at the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library for thirty-five years, as an employee of the D.C. government. I started as a volunteer, then as a part-time worker, and then full-time. My wife, Donna, worked for more than twenty-one years at Walter Reed Medical Center and is now at the Army Medical Center in Bethesda. My brother William works at Catholic University. All of us pay taxes and make a difference in our jobs and in our communities. Donna and I serve on many boards and committees to make things better for people with disabilities, and we are very active in our church.

I couldn't always advocate and do what I can do now. I had people who believed in me and who supported me—friends and providers. I've seen people with severe disabilities who have grown and accomplished great things given the right support. For many people, support comes through Medicaid, which helps people live in the community and get services such as personal care, transportation, and help learning to do things like plan and manage their household. I hear people say that some people are too disabled to live in the community, but I've seen people just like the people still in institutions who do so much better in the community—because no one expects you to do anything in the institution but survive.

I love Special Olympics because they encourage us to focus on our abilities and to show off our abilities, not our disabilities. Some of the best support Donna and I have received has been from friends. When you live in the community, you make friends and they support you in your advocacy and in raising your son when you have questions and when you have to make major decisions in your life. When you live in the community, you don't have to depend on staff for all of your sup-



port, and you get to support others as well. You develop networks that you could never have in the institution. I've seen this happen for so many people, including people with severe disabilities.

When I was in Forest Haven, I had a chance to go to the cottage that had the people with the most severe disabilities, who mostly stayed in bed all day. Someone at Forest Haven got a grant so that we went in, gave people musical instruments, and played music while they played along. They loved it and never wanted to go back to their beds. When the grant ended, that program ended. If they had lived in the community, their music would not have stopped and wouldn't have depended on a grant.

When I left Forest Haven, I was asked to be on the mayor's committee on people with disabilities that was set up to close it. It was a great day when the last person left Forest Haven in 1991. What I've seen is that when people are given a chance to grow and contribute, they grow and contribute.

We ask that you ensure that people continue to be given chances to have good lives and to grow in their communities with support. I believe that people can do anything if they're given the opportunity and support. We can't go back. We can't go back to a time when people are moved against their will to places where they have no opportunities to learn, grow, and contribute. We need to keep moving forward. People invested in me and my wife and brother. When we were in the institution, we didn't have a voice. We were thought to be incompetent, so no one took the time to teach us things. But people can accomplish great things with support. Having an intellectual disability doesn't limit what you can contribute. Being put in institutions doesn't limit what people can do and guarantees that people will be dependent on the rest of their lives.

Anyone can become disabled at any time. We are people

like everyone else. The time needs to be over for people to be sent to institutions because there aren't options in the community or because people think it's cheaper or more protected. It wastes people's lives and, in the long run, keeps them from contributing. There's no such thing as a good institution.

Segregating people is always bad; people never grow in those places and are safer and happier in the community. I'm one of many people who could be here today. People sometimes say that I'm not like some of the other people with intellectual disabilities. The only thing that's special about me is that people believed in me and in my potential to learn in spite of my disability, and they took the time to help me learn. Please protect people from places where no one expects anything from them and where they're just kept alive. We can't go back. It's time to move forward. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today and for your continued support of people with disabilities.