

July 20, 2015

Micki Edelsohn deserves an apology

I'm still trying to process my experience on Saturday at the ADA 25th anniversary celebration in Dover. Invited by Micki Edelsohn to visit her Families Speaking Up table, upon my arrival it quickly became apparent that she and her group were not welcome. Not only was Micki not given "a seat at the table," she wasn't even allowed to stand near a table. To my astonishment, this woman, inducted into the Delaware Women's Hall of Fame for her passionate dedication to the developmentally disabled, was told by three Dover police officers to remove her information from the space Special Olympics had generously offered to share with her.

Bewildered and confused, when Micki questioned why she was being asked to leave, they responded the groups' views were in opposition to the gathering.

Then, this woman whose Homes for Life Foundation has helped provide 25 outstanding group living situations for the developmentally disabled in the State of Delaware, was stalked all afternoon like a criminal. Where did this come from...who is feeling so very threatened?

On a day set aside to celebrate inclusion and civil liberties, somebody really dropped the ball. Sorry State of Delaware. I know the pot is small and the need is great; but come out from behind your desks and spend some time in a clinic, a special classroom or a real life home of someone with special needs.

Not everyone will fit in your mold and Micki advocates for the neediest. Micki deserves a very public apology.

Susan Thaler-Leshem

Lewes

July 21, 2015

ADA celebration was marred

I read a News Journal article on the American with Disabilities Act's 25th Anniversary Celebration in Dover and was sadly dismayed that the "difference of opinion" by the event organizers excluded Families Speaking Up from participation in a celebratory event. What was this about? Is this "territorial disability" that claims "my disability" is more important than "your disability?" I just find this sad.

Saturday's ADA celebration was to celebrate a historic landmark that seeks societal inclusion and participation of people with disabilities. It's a huge accomplishment that has supported employment, educational, and/or housing opportunities. My friend who is blind, my son who has neurological challenges, my friend in a wheelchair, and my brother with Down Syndrome have been beneficiaries of increased inclusion and participation. The ADA involves all people with disabilities.

The event organizers should know better than to "flex their muscle" to exclude any group of advocates because they oppose one group's platform. This will hurt all disability groups in the long run. We have come too far to go backwards.

Jane Luke

Newark

July 22, 2015

Why treat event participants so poorly?

My brother, who has intellectual and developmental disabilities, looked forward to the American with Disabilities Act 25th Anniversary celebration in Dover. He wanted a commemorative T-shirt, to enjoy seeing friends, listen to live music and eat ice cream. All these were accomplished but we could never have imagined the disturbing scene we were to witness that day. As we and a number of others looked on, we saw an event organizer, angrily order Micki and Lanny Edelson, of Families Speaking UP, who had registered for a table, to pick up their things and leave. My brother was becoming increasingly anxious seeing his friends treated in such an outrageous manner. I thought it best for us to move away at that point. As we walked, he asked in a worried tone: "Are they going to make us leave too?" How can a disabilities advocate, who supposedly represents Delaware citizens with ALL disabilities, blatantly deny a grass-roots advocacy organization like Families Speaking UP the opportunity to participate in a public event? It was especially hurtful that a vulnerable person like my brother was exposed to this disturbing incident of forced exclusion.

Lisa J. Elias
Townsend

Disabilities advocate was mistreated

Micki Edelson has devoted her life to speaking up and giving a voice to those who cannot speak for themselves. No one in our state and perhaps nationally has devoted more time, brought more passion and given up so much to help this group. The treatment of her at Saturday's Dover event to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act is horrifying. Not allowing Families Speaking Up and Micki to share a Special Olympics table is so discriminating. All who respect and admire her work shudder at the image of the police asking her to remove her information. Shouldn't there be consequences for those who treated Micki with such disrespect?

Carroll M. Carpenter
Wilmington

Disabilities conference wronged advocate

It's a sad day for American with Disabilities Act, when exclusion – rather than inclusion marks the 25th anniversary celebration. Families representing the Families Speaking UP attended the celebration and were asked to leave the main tent without explanation and barred from showing their signs or handing out pamphlets! My son will need a group home the rest of his life, and has been in a sheltered work shop since he was 21. He has a room mate with no parents. What will happen to these people without this help. This event was sponsored so ALL advocacy groups could speak. With all the serious and grave disabilities, can't we speak for all those in need not just the for those who can go out and work?
Sherry Mellbye

July 23, 2015

Do not ban advocates for disabled

I am writing this letter regarding the article "ADA celebration, one group shunned" that was in Sunday's paper. I am a member of Families Speaking Up and I was present Saturday in Dover to celebrate the 25th anniversary of Americans with Disabilities Act. I would like to clarify a couple of things right from the start. On this most important day of celebrating inclusion, someone in authority definitely excluded our group, FSU. First, there were empty tables under the main tent throughout the day. Second, I have no idea why Dover police officers would randomly approach our group while sharing a table with Special Olympics and tell us to remove our signs. Maybe those officers would like to comment? I might have a rough idea why our group was excluded and shunned. It is because of what we stand for. We are the voices of the intellectually and physically disabled who may not have the ability to speak for themselves. We believe that these individuals deserve respect and dignity and the "Right to Choose." Yet, our intellectually and physically disabled are told where and with whom they can live and where they can and cannot work. This population is not allowed to live too closely to one another. So what we have been told about inclusion has actually led to discrimination. We bring a lot to the table if only people and agencies would be willing to listen.

Michelle Dwyer
Middletown

July 27, 2015

Apology is needed for ADA incident

The embarrassing scene that took place at the American with Disabilities Act 25th anniversary celebration in Dover was a disgrace, and not what this event was all about. To harass Micki Edelson, the founder of Families Speaking Up and Homes for Life who, for so many years has dedicated her life to providing advocacy and building homes for the special needs people in Delaware, was confusing and shocking.

Not only is an apology necessary, but it is important to know who is responsible for ordering the police to stop the Families Speaking Up group to leave!

I thought everyone had similar objectives, to support the future of all special needs people, not just certain groups. We have a 33-year-old special needs son who lives with us. His future is a top priority of ours. Why can't we work together for a common cause? Who is responsible for what happened in Dover?

Joanne Johnston
Landenberg, Pennsylvania

Disabilities services nearing crisis

It is no secret that disabilities services, including employment and housing, are nearing a crisis point in Delaware. Family members tirelessly advocate for services and supports for their sons and daughters, their brothers and sisters. Delaware families obviously are not represented well with the "one size fits all" mentality of our "paid advocate" groups. As displayed at the ADA Anniversary

Celebration, families are actually excluded by our “paid advocates.”

It is also no secret that there is obvious infighting between family advocates and the “paid advocates” in our state. And it was on full display at the event for all to witness.

How embarrassing for Delaware to mark the 25th ADA Anniversary with a shameful attitude of exclusion. Why was law enforcement dispatched to intimidate the Families Speaking Up group? What was the violation? Freedom of speech? There was no loud disturbance.

There was no cause for alarm. If there was a misunderstanding, it could have been handled without police confrontation. I joined Families Speaking Up in hopes of gaining support, gaining a network, to become a stronger advocate for my older sister Jean who was born with an intellectual/developmental disability. Families Speaking Up is a grassroots advocacy group that embraces all disabilities and their families in a sincere effort to improve the lives of our disability communication.

The family members of Families Speaking Up had a right to be represented at the ADA Celebration and to be represented with dignity and respect. This did not happen.

Mary Steppi
Elsmere

July 30, 2015

Society should truly be open to all

The opportunity to attend Delaware’s 25th Anniversary Celebration of the Americans with Disabilities Act excited me. As I listened to Vice President Biden via video and other speakers recount achievements for citizens with disabilities back to the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 and earlier, I thought of the “Sign 504” button that is still in my desk drawer. I recalled going to Philadelphia to join a group of advocates for passage of the bill. It was gratifying to think back to those days and realize today how far we have come.

Yet, as one of the speakers was saying that our society is now open for all, a very different scenario was taking place in the tent at the exact same time. A police officer had approached the grassroots group, Families Speaking Up, and advised that our organization was not entitled to a table in the tent that Special Olympics kindly shared with us. The officer then ordered Micki Edelson, founder of Families Speaking Up, to remove all brochures and materials. At the bottom of some emails from Delaware’s Developmental Disabilities Council, the following quotation is shown, “If you don’t have a seat at the table, you are probably on the menu.” I, for one, am tired of the most vulnerable of Delaware’s citizens with disabilities, those who cannot speak for themselves, being on the menu. It’s time to stop the stridency and assumptions that any group is entitled to determine what is best for another group or individual.

Gail Womble
Bear