



November 21, 2014

Disability Community Bids Farewell to Kay Marcel

After thirty years of advocacy, leadership, and volunteer service to Louisiana's disability community and beyond, DD Council Chairperson Kay Marcel and her family are moving to Iowa. The loss to Louisiana, its citizens with disabilities, and their families is difficult to comprehend.



No one in Louisiana has made a more significant impact on changing the service system for people with developmental disabilities and their families than Kay Marcel. When Kay entered the disability public arena, individualized community and family supports were virtually non-existent in Louisiana, individuals and families had very little control over the supports they received, and most children and adults with developmental disabilities spent their days (or lived) in segregated settings. Kay has spent the last thirty years working to change that. Her advocacy for individual and family support services, inclusive education, and real employment opportunities has improved the lives of tens of thousands of individuals with disabilities and their families and has changed forever the attitudes of many who once thought people with severe disabilities could not live in their own homes, be included in their communities, be educated alongside their peers without disabilities and be competitively employed.

Kay began her advocacy journey in 1984 and quickly grew into an articulate, passionate, and respected leader. She served six terms on the DD Council for a total of 22 years and was elected or re-elected Chairperson five times. During her first term she led the Council's efforts to create a community and family support system through the passage of Act 378 of 1989 and subsequently led the groups that developed the plan for this system and oversaw its implementation. Kay also served as the volunteer Statewide Coordinator of the Council's grassroots advocacy network, LaCAN, for 22 years, and stayed actively involved in the Council's advocacy work even in the years she was not a Council member.

Act 378 was monumental legislation that was touted as a national model and changed the course of supports and services for people with developmental disabilities in Louisiana, but this law wasn't the only landmark legislation passed under Kay's leadership. Act 833 of 2014, creating a pathway to promotion and a diploma – and subsequent employment – for many students with disabilities, was landmark education legislation that passed under Kay's watch. And Act 481 of 2007, which created a recurring source of funding for New Opportunities Waiver slots, is of enormous benefit in years the state has a surplus.

Kay has advocated tirelessly with the legislature for sufficient funding of supports and services people with developmental disabilities need to remain in their own homes and be contributing members of their communities and she has trained, mentored and empowered hundreds of other parents and advocates to do the same. Under Kay's leadership, the Council's grassroots advocacy efforts have been phenomenally successful, securing funding for thousands upon thousands of waiver slots and



the state-funded Flexible Family Fund and Individual and Family Support Programs, securing approval and funding for Louisiana to implement the Family Opportunity Act, and in the creation and funding of the Families Helping Families Resource Centers statewide. Kay was also instrumental in convincing the Secretary of the Department of Health and Hospitals (DHH) to appoint a Council-led committee to rewrite the original home and community-based waiver for people with developmental disabilities. This effort resulted in the New Opportunities Waiver, one of the most individualized and comprehensive waivers in the nation.

Kay did not limit her efforts to Council activities. Space does not permit the listing of all the groups, committees/task forces, and non-profit boards on which Kay donated her time and talent, but a few are of special note. She served on Governor Foster's Health Care Transition Team, the Acadiana Area Human Services District Board, and was elected to two terms on the Iberia Parish School Board where she served as Board President. Kay testified before a U.S. Congressional Subcommittee, made numerous state and national presentations, and even co-authored a book chapter on grassroots advocacy.

While Kay volunteered the majority of her time, she was employed for several years on grants through the Louisiana Department of Education where she made a positive impact on inclusive education and transition for students with disabilities. Kay was very influential in the education arena, affecting areas such as policy development, instructional support, parental involvement, and agency-school system partnerships.

For three decades Kay travelled to Baton Rouge from her home in New Iberia to talk about her son, Joel, and the needs of thousands of other Louisiana citizens with developmental disabilities and their families. But she didn't only talk about their needs; she also talked about what they contribute to their families and their communities. She talked about self-determination, independence, productivity, and inclusion in all facets of community life. She talked about why segregation is wrong and how communities are enriched when people with disabilities are included. Kay was passionate in her testimony in legislative committee hearings, in state agency meetings, and in small groups, but she was always polite and respectful. She earned the respect of legislators, state government officials, advocates, and most importantly, individuals and families. As busy as she was, she always found time to help people needing assistance in their personal situations.

For those who did not know Kay personally, you missed out on a loving, compassionate, and generous friend who was quick to whip out pictures of her fiercely-loved grandchildren. But you also missed out on knowing a strong, intelligent, and tenacious leader with the utmost integrity who had a vision of a better world for people with developmental disabilities and worked tirelessly to make it a reality. Our thoughts, best wishes and heartfelt gratitude go with Kay as she moves close to those grandchildren and embarks on this new stage of her life. Louisiana's loss is clearly Iowa's gain.

The Council also wishes to thank Kay's husband, Steve, and their family, for their support of her advocacy efforts.