

April 20, 2015
A Birthday Wish For Governor Kean

Happy Birthday Governor Kean, from your friends and families representing people with disabilities. Your 80 years on this earth have helped so many both in and outside of New Jersey.

Last year, our nonprofit, Community Options, celebrated our silver anniversary. When I incorporated Community Options in 1989, Governor Kean through his leadership, optimism and administration proved to be a catalyst for our development and a significant factor for our continued success. We all reflected on what a gentleman he is and how much he helped people with disabilities.

Our board was so grateful for his support that last year we honored Governor Kean at our national headquarters in Princeton (the University in which he received his bachelor's in history in 1957). During his acceptance speech, the then 79-year-old Governor (who drove himself to our event) accepted the award and used an acorn seed metaphor to compare his advocacy for us in helping people with disabilities find housing and jobs.

Governor Kean showed so much humility when we gave him a tour of our homes and employment. He had seen how much we grew from literally submitting incorporation papers that were drawn up on a kitchen table to his office. Governor Kean's comparison to an acorn turning into a tall tree was perfect.

You see, after completing two successful terms as Governor (the first Republican to win twice since 1954) with one of the most acclaimed landslide victories that would make any politician jealous, Governor Kean went on to be President of Drew University. It is here that the acorn became obvious. The University shield is a tree with the motto-translated meaning, "Freely have you received, freely give."

In recognizing our nonprofit, Governor Kean exemplified truly how he has lived his entire life. Modeled after his family history consisting of relatives who include governors, a congressman, a member of the Continental Congress, the first constitutional governor of

New Jersey and two United States senators, it is obvious that his family planted a great deal of acorns. He did not start out as a great orator.

At an early age, Governor Kean was known to be shy. He talked about his wonderful teachers that helped him to overcome his learning disabilities. Filled with a sense of accomplishment, he signed the most notable legislation for persons with disabilities in the history of New Jersey.

As of late, autism has become so widely recognized as an important developmental disability, challenging treatment modalities and causes. Prior to Governor Kean's election, autism was not recognized as a distinct developmental disability. Autism was considered no different than mental retardation. Up until the mid-eighties, the New Jersey Division of Developmental Disabilities was called the Division of Mental Retardation. Persons with cerebral palsy, traumatic brain injury, and epilepsy were excluded and autism was not even in the configuration, let alone a distinct disability. Research and prevention for disabilities was considered a budgetary taboo. All of this changed after Governor Kean was elected.

I worked in state service when the Governor was elected. At that time, he was the only Governor that visited all 19 institutions (some more than once). I was with him when he visited the now closed North Jersey Development Center in Totowa. He went into the nursery and saw some of the most challenging people with significant deformities anyone could ever witness. He learned that some of these disabilities could in fact have been prevented with proper treatments and research. Governor Kean created the Governor's Committee on the Prevention of Developmental Disabilities. He enlisted the support of his wife Debbie and made her chair. (I actually drafted the document as a 26 year-old executive assistant and he personally hand delivered the signed copy to my cubical –inspirational)

Still, he wanted to do more. After a blue ribbon committee on autism offered their forgone conclusion that autism was a disability in need of treatment and after another private public committee developed a strategy to evolve the Division of Mental Retardation into the Division of Developmental Disabilities, a bill was drafted and ultimately signed by Governor Kean in April 1985. Of the greatest significance, Governor Kean was able to facilitate over 4,000 people with developmental disabilities to live in the community. He has always championed the rights of the vulnerable as a statesman and as a gentleman.

As the Governor completed a graduate degree in history, he stayed active in the civil rights movement in the sixties. Governor Kean ran a visionary administration that fought for the injustices of the vulnerable and down trodden. After the horrific event at the World Trade Tower, President Bush appointed Governor Kean as Chair of the 9/11 Commission.

The Governor helps all of us nurture a rich legacy. Governor Kean has proven to be the living example of inclusive political, management leadership with disabilities, the arts and education. Flanked by his twin sons, daughter and his wife, this man did so much for so many. When he accepted our nonprofit's award on behalf of people with disabilities he said, "You all did the work, I just helped plant the acorn seed". So, on behalf of people with disabilities everywhere: Happy 80th birthday Governor Kean and many more! Thank you for making not only New Jersey but also the world a better place. As you use to say "New Jersey and you, perfect together.'

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