



## Opinion: A birthday wish for Gov. Tom Kean, who freely gave his support to people with disabilities

kean seated.JPG

Former Gov. Thomas Kean, New Jersey's elder statesman, turned 80 on April 21. *(Robert Sciarrino | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com, April 17, 2015 file photo)*

**Times of Trenton guest opinion column** By **Times of Trenton guest opinion column**

on April 24, 2015 at 8:00 AM

**By Robert Stack**

Gov. Tom Kean's friends and families who represent people with disabilities wish him a very happy birthday. As he marks his 80th birthday this week, we celebrate everything he has done that has helped so many, both within and outside of New Jersey.

Last year, we at Community Options celebrated our silver anniversary. When I incorporated Community Options in 1989, Gov. Kean's leadership and optimism and his administration proved to be catalysts for our growth and a significant factor in our continued success. We all appreciate 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 presented him with our Betty Pendler Award at our national headquarters in Princeton. During his acceptance speech, the governor used an acorn seed metaphor to illustrate his advocacy for us in our work helping people with disabilities find housing and jobs.

Gov. Kean showed much humility when we gave him a tour of our homes and employment sites. He saw how much we grew from the time we submitted incorporation papers to his office, which had been drawn up on a kitchen table. His comparison to an acorn turning into a tall tree was perfect.

After completing two successful terms as governor and enjoying one of the most acclaimed landslide election victories, Gov. Kean went on to become president of Drew University. It is there that his acorn idea became obvious: The university shield is inscribed with the motto that translates to "Freely have you received, freely give."

In recognizing our nonprofit, Gov. Kean exemplified how he has lived his entire life. He comes from a family whose members were 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, Tom Kean was known to be shy. He talked about his wonderful teachers who helped him overcome his learning disabilities. Later, as governor, filled with a sense of accomplishment, he signed the most notable legislation for persons with disabilities in the history of New Jersey.

Up until the mid-80s, 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 recognized as a distinct disability. Funding research and prevention of disabilities was considered budgetary taboo. All of this changed after Gov. Kean was elected.

He was the only governor who visited all 19 institutions (some more than once). I worked in state service at the time. I was with him when he visited the now-closed North Jersey Developmental 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 the disabilities could in fact have been prevented with proper treatment and research. Gov. Kean created the Governor's Committee on the Prevention of Developmental Disabilities. He enlisted the support of his wife Debbie and made her chairwoman. (I actually drafted the document as a 26-year-old executive assistant and he personally hand-delivered the signed copy to my cubicle — inspirational!)

Still, he wanted to do more. After a blue-ribbon committee on autism offered its 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 Gov. Kean in April 1985. Of the greatest significance, he integrated more than 4,000 people with developmental disabilities from institutions into the community. He has always championed the rights of the vulnerable as a statesman and as a gentleman.

Tom Kean was active in the civil rights movement in the '60s. He ran a visionary administration that fought against injustice suffered by the vulnerable and downtrodden. After the horrific terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, President George W. Bush appointed Gov. Kean chairman of the 9/11 Commission.

The governor helps all of us nurture a rich legacy. Supported by his family, 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, Gov. Kean, and many more! Thank you for making not only New Jersey, but also the world, a better place. As you used to say: "New Jersey and you, perfect together."

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