Making Communication Happen Worldwide was a conference held in Burlington back in October, focusing on supporting both adults and youth who have disabilities and communication challenges, to help them communicate socially, and in the world.

The conference was held at the Hilton, and was an all day event featuring many workshops to attend, and tables setup for people to visit with useful information to take home with them about communication with people with disabilities. Each workshop shared different information about personal stories, or ways to help with communication. There were also two keynote guest speakers, Douglas Biklen, Ph.D., Dean of the School of Education at Syracuse University and Jamie Burke, a Syracuse University Student, who discussed new ways of thinking about developmental disabilities and personal experiences with people with disabilities around the world.

I was lucky enough to be a part of the workshop portion of this conference. Myself and another high school student from Montpelier, Kyle Moriarty, presented people with our personal struggles and also growth with using alternative ways to communicate in our lives. It gave people a chance to see what kind of journey we have been through, while finding ways to get our voices heard through typing.

One of the most talked about portions of this conference was the first preview of the movie, Wretches & Jabberers, a film about two men with autism who journey to Sri Lanka, Japan and Finland to change the view and attitudes about people who have disabilities, and their intelligence. For these two men, learning to communicate through typing changed their lives, and their message and hope from this film is that all these possibilities and goals are attainable for others like them. It is a must see film for anyone who is living with a disability, or knows someone who has a disability. It will certainly warm your heart.

The conference was a great learning experience for me, and I’m sure for everyone else who attended. It is getting the message out there that communication is possible for anyone, and that living with a disability does not mean your hopes and dreams can’t be obtained.
Green Mountain Self-Advocates

The purpose of Green Mountain Self-Advocates is for people with developmental disabilities to take control over their own lives, make decisions, solve problems and speak for themselves. We educate and make the public aware of the strengths, rights, wants and needs of people with developmental disabilities.

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GREEN MOUNTAIN SELF-ADVOCATES
Voices and Choices Conference
May 9-10, 2011
Burlington, VT

www.gmsavt.org
Vermont’s 13th Annual Self-Advocacy Conference
Maisie LaJeunesse is a junior at Spaulding High School in Barre, VT. In the summer of 2010, she worked as an intern at Green Mountain Self-Advocates writing articles about self-advocacy.

Many people may not be aware of a very important bill that was passed in Vermont called H66. This bill allows for students who have disabilities to graduate with their fellow classmates and friends, even if they will be continuing their education for a few years longer at their high school.

For students like myself who will be staying at school longer to continue working towards my credits so I can go to college, this is very important. Even though things may take more time for me to do, I am still as capable to take the classes I need to fulfill my graduation requirements, but with just a little more time.

However, just because students like myself may need more time, we should not be excluded from celebrating with the classmates we have grown up with, and would otherwise be graduating with. There are many other times during school where we are unable to do things with the other students due to our disabilities; graduation should certainly not be one of them.

Being able to go through all the fun and all the monumental high school graduation activities with your class is something you only experience once. Why not let these students feel like a part of their class? Although I will be lucky enough to graduate with my class many students with disabilities before me were not so lucky. I feel sad for the ones who dropped out and had to make the choice between their friends and school.

For me, this will be a very important day and one I won’t forget. Celebrating with some special friends and classmates I have been with since I was little will be a feeling like none other.

Bill Allows For Students with Disabilities to Graduate with Their Friends

By Maisie LaJeunesse

Todd Geraci, an 18-year-old student with autism from Morrisville graduates with his fellow classmates after going to court to fight for his right to celebrate with his class even though he will be on the extended school year plan. Many of Todd’s fellow classmates showed their support by going to the courtroom with him.
Green Mountain Self-Advocates Attend SABE Conference
By Max Barrows

Self-Advocates Becoming Empowered hosts a national conference every two years. 1000 self-advocates from across the country along with support staff and allies attend. It is a great opportunity to meet new friends, learn from them, and stay connected. Green Mountain Self-Advocates was a big participant at the National Conference in Kansas City. About 70 self-advocates from GMSA attended. GMSA taught 8 workshops:

1. Standing On The Great Wall: The Great Divide Between The Disability And Non-Disability Sides Of The World
2. That's So Queer And Other Words To Avoid
3. The Dating Game
4. Sexual Self-Advocacy
5. Sheltered Workshops: Shut Them Down
6. Getting Out Of Debt For Good
7. Beyond Paralysis: Supporting People With Disabilities To Express Their Sexuality
8. Employment For Vermonters With Disabilities

Presenting a workshop at a national conference is a learning experience. For example, you hear other self-advocates share their experiences in their lives. It’s a good way to learn from each other.

Every two years a new regional representative is elected on the SABE Board. The regional elections are held at the national conference. This year, Max Barrows was elected the new Vice-President of Self-Advocates Becoming Empowered (SABE). Those who attend our state conference may remember Betty Williams as our keynote speaker. She is now the new President of SABE!

The SABE national conference has great keynote speakers. These are people with great leadership in the Self-Advocacy movement. Max Barrows from Vermont was one of the keynote speakers that spoke at the conference. You can’t have a conference without
having **FUN** and lots of it! In Kansas City, there was a **HUGE** dance that happened every night. Like the dances we have at our state conference, but BIGGER!

There is always plenty to do in the city. Touring is great! Take a walk around the city parks. Find some great museums to check out. If you like to go out to eat, there are plenty of good restaurants to find. Every city has its own style of food. In Kansas City, we found that it’s known for barbeque. It feels good to try new things while away from home! I enjoy going out with a group of friends around the town.

I highly recommend self-advocates attend a national conference. You will enjoy seeing a different place, meeting new people and learning from them. You may also get good tips on how to develop leadership skills. You will enjoy the overall experience!
Capitol City Advocacy Association (CCAA) once again participated in the Independence Day Parade in Montpelier on July 3rd. CCAA is one of the eighteen local self-advocacy groups within Green Mountain Self-Advocates (GMSA). The purpose of GMSA is for people with developmental disabilities to take control over their own lives, make decisions, solve problems and speak for themselves. We educate and make the public aware of the strengths, rights, wants and needs of people with developmental disabilities.

The message for the parade was to get rid of the “R” Word. The big banner we marched out front spelled out our message: “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can last forever. When you say ‘R#tard’, it hurts. Spread the word!”

My personal observation was that persons with disabilities and their families were pleased to see that someone was getting the word out about this important issue. The “R” word has been used insultingly for many, many years, hurting and putting down persons with disabilities. Along the parade route, I had conversations with several elementary school kids, who asked what this was all about. I gave them the best explanation I could; they listened and said they got it.

I am proud to say that it was our best parade yet! We decided to walk instead of having a float. This way was much more interactive. A lot of our members were recognized by people they knew. Our group received lots of loud applause and cheers. People were calling out our names and shaking our hands. Overall, our group felt empowered. The public seemed moved and touched by us being there. Our message was clear and well received! I highly recommend that people with all kinds of disabilities identify their issues and speak out directly to the public!
Introducing Self-Advocacy to Youth

1. When you meet with students, begin by asking them what they think self-advocacy is. Get their perspective first. This gets them thinking.

2. Take time to explain how a self-advocacy group is run. Set up group agreements. They should include reminding teachers to talk as little as possible. Self-advocates make the decisions, not the teachers. Teachers provide support but they are not in charge.

3. A self-advocacy meeting may be new to students, so remember to take your time and not go too fast.

4. Ask students if they want you to talk about your experience moving beyond high school. This could give them a preview of what to expect in the future. It might be the first time they have talked about growing up with peers. The truth comes from us and it is not sugarcoated.

5. Self-advocacy can give you the courage to listen to your voice. A peer atmosphere helps you to say what is on your mind. Be careful not to shut down another person’s dreams. Try to make everyone feel listened to.

6. Support students to make their own decisions. Give them a chance to take control. Do not judge them. Tell them their opinions are important.

7. Talk to them about guardianship alternatives.

8. Make the meeting fun with lots of hands-on activities. Find meaningful ways for students to get involved. For example: attending a statewide self-advocacy conference; working with you on a community service project; helping teach a workshop.

9. Sometimes students are reluctant to speak up with teachers in the room. They may need to be encouraged. Be careful not to interrupt a young person. Give them time to share their ideas. When an adult interrupts it sometimes can shut the person down and they stop talking.

10. Create an atmosphere that says it is okay to make mistakes. No question is a silly question.

11. Be laid back. Listen. Don’t jump in with an answer. Give space for students to come up with their own answers and ideas.

12. Remember students have busy lives. They may choose to hang out with their friends instead of meeting with you. Respect their choices.