Disability Awareness Day

On February 17th, Disability Awareness Day was a State House event. It is important for people with disabilities to get together with their legislators to have their voice be heard. This was a way for legislators to get connected to people within our network and to keep us in mind despite hard economic times. We had a great turnout at this event. Over 150 GMSA members and allies attended.

One of the first things that happened was GMSA facilitated a session where people had an opportunity to share their personal stories. This wasn’t just personal stories that were told, but concerns about how cuts in the budget would impact their lives. People did a GREAT job expressing their concerns. During the speak-up session, legislators stopped in frequently to listen to self-advocates. They also addressed people about where things stand, but said how great it is to hear our stories.

Many self-advocates made appointments with their legislators. They would do that by contacting them ahead of time. First, through email, then by leaving a note at the Sergeant at Arms office in the State House. Later, self-advocate attended committee meetings where some had the opportunity to testify.

In the evening, there was a dinner held in the cafeteria. Many legislators attended the dinner. They talked with self-advocates and their families.

I feel that every year we do this event, it is a great way for GMSA and legislators to build a connection. Thank you all for taking the time to attend this event and keep up the good work of speaking up!
GMSA has been holding focus forums at agencies that provide Developmental Services. This is all part of how agencies are being reviewed for how they are doing. At the focus forums, people who receive services from that agency have been giving their input. Because GMSA connects with local groups a few times a year, we felt like this was a good way to take an independent look at what people like about their services and come up with suggestions about what agencies can try to do differently.

The information this time is coming from self-advocates directly. The way it works is we ask self-advocates a list of questions and each of their answers are written down. During this activity, we ask staff to leave the room so self-advocates can speak freely. This information is shared with the Developmental Services State Standing Committee, which has the responsibility of voting whether or not to recertify the agency. We also share the information with the director of the agency. The information given directly from self-advocates is truly appreciated!

Focus Forums By Max Barrows

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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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Everyone in their lifetime has seen or heard someone being called names, or being picked on. Others have experienced it first hand. Unfortunately it seems as though people with disabilities are faced with the challenge of being made fun of more than the average person probably does.

Some people are not aware when they are being cruel or hurtful towards people with disabilities. In our society, we are exposed to movies and media poking fun at those who may be different. One of the most common things that is said is the word “r#tard”.

The ‘R” word is used more often then it should be, and it seems as though people feel it is an appropriate term; however, it is not. This is a very offensive word to those like myself and others. Using this word makes people not only sound ignorant, but genuinely mean.

As a person with a disability, and who is surrounded by many friends with disabilities, I have seen my fair share of people being picked on. It hurts to see the people I care about being made to feel bad for how they are. I would like for people to walk a day in any of our shoes and see how it feels. Maybe it would make them think twice before saying or doing something hurtful.
Are You Prepared?

Have you given any thought on what you would do if a disaster occurred? Here in the U.S, we have our share of natural and man-made disasters. Natural disasters include hurricanes (Katrina), tornadoes, flash floods, and ice storms. Man-made events have been terrorist attacks (9/11), nuclear power plants (3 Mile Island), and bridge collapses (Minnesota).

When disasters strike, there are two basic possibilities. First, you may have to stay put (shelter in place) for an inconvenient period of time. Or, you may have to get out in a hurry (evacuate). In either case, you need to prepare! So, what do you need to be thinking about?

When you have to shelter in place, what are your basic needs? If the power is out for several days, would you be able to stay warm, have enough food and water, or be able to communicate with others? You should have an emergency bag ready. This might include matches, candles, flashlights, batteries, blankets, water, medications, can food, a cell phone, and a battery powered radio.

Emergency Supplies When You’re Stuck At Home

Supplies are expensive! Just buy a few things at a time and put them away in a dry place.

Food and Water
- Water: 1 gallon per person per day
- Ready-to-eat canned meats, fruits and vegetables, juices and soups
- High energy foods—peanut butter, jelly, crackers, granola bars, trail mix
- Comfort foods: Cookies, hard candy, instant coffee, tea bags
- Special diet foods if needed

Tools
- Flashlight and extra batteries
- Battery operated radio or TV
- Manual can opener
- ABC-type fire extinguisher
- Shut-off wrench to turn off household gas or water if necessary
- Matches in waterproof container

Other Important Items
- Books, cards, games (to keep you busy & calm)
- Extra eyeglasses

Supply List (as needed)
- Extra batteries for wheelchair, medical equipment, hearing aids, etc.
- Wheelchair patch kit
- Gloves for manual wheelchair
- Cards listing key phrases you would use in an emergency
- Extra medical supplies like dressing materials, catheters, syringes

Sanitation Supplies
- Toilet paper and feminine hygiene products
- Soap, hand sanitizer, disinfectant
- Plastic garbage bags and plastic bucket with tight lid

First Aid Kit and Medicines
- Non-prescription medicines like pain relievers, stomach remedies, etc.
- Extra prescription medicines
- First Aid Kit and manual
Getting the real information about what's going on can be challenging when you are stuck in one place. Feelings of isolation can kick in, and not knowing what's going on can be frightening. For example, when 9/11 occurred, some people with disabilities in Vermont were afraid that New York City was much closer than it actually is. They needed accurate information so they wouldn't feel as scared!

If you had to get out in a hurry (evacuate), what would you need to think about? One thing to consider is having a backpack ready to go. It might contain ID and insurance cards, medications for several days, contact numbers for family and friends, money, flashlights, food, and bottled water. Another tool to include might be a pre-written plan about where to meet in case you get separated from your supports, and where your nearest shelter is located.

Before disasters occur, it would be a great idea for local self-advocacy groups to meet with emergency first responders. This would be helpful in educating first responders to know how to assist persons with disabilities respectfully. What if suddenly someone came to your house, and told you to evacuate? I, for one, would deeply appreciate them taking the time to accurately explain what is going on. It might take a little bit of patience to let my mind process this information!

There are a lot of States that have been working on emergency preparedness for persons with disabilities. Check with your local and state self-advocacy organizations to see what’s been done already. For a national resource, you can visit: www.disabilitypreparedness.gov. Hopefully, we can all be better prepared and be more in charge of ourselves in the event of a disaster!

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**Pack A Bag To Go With You In An Emergency**

Put these things in a bag but don’t make it too heavy.

- Change of clothing and shoes
- Personal care products (toothbrush, etc.)
- Cash
- Towel
- Prepaid phone card
- Blanket or sleeping bag
- Extra eyeglasses
- Flashlight and batteries
- Copies of *Emergency Information Sheet and Emergency Contact List*
- Copies of important documents like (birth certificate, driver’s license,

Make a note *that says “Don’t Forget Your Medications!”* Pin the sign on the outside of your bag.

Checklists adapted from:
http://dail.vermont.gov/dail-resources/emergency-preparedness-assistance/view?searchterm=emergency%20preparedness
VOICES & CHOICES
CONFERENCE
GMSA held its 12th annual Voices & Choices Conference at the Sheraton Hotel in Burlington May 10 & 11. The theme we chose was No More “Back in the Day”. It was based on how persons with disabilities were treated negatively in the past. For example, you were seen as a problem to be fixed. In addition, you were labeled “Special” or with the “R” word.

This year, nearly 500 Self-Advocates attended the Conference. At the Monday night dinner, Senator Doug Racine was awarded one of the Allies of the Year. He was chosen because he stood up for persons with disabilities during the debates on budget cuts at the State House this year. Our Keynote speaker this year was Betty Williams. In the past, Betty was the Vice President of Self-Advocates Becoming Empowered (SABE). Currently, she is President of Self-Advocates of Indiana, and works for the Arc of Indiana as an Education and Training Coordinator. Betty is a great leader in the Self-Advocacy movement. Betty also contributed to the conference on a personal level. Self-Advocates got to know her as a warm hearted person who is open to meeting new people.

Monday afternoon, the conference had a variety of fun activities, such as African Drumming, an art activity were Self-Advocates painted woven stars and hung them on a tree. The Dating Game and Flirty Dancing drew a lot of people. Who could not be entertained enough by these? The GMSA Store was up and running well. New shirts were sold that said “Think first, Names Hurt” as part of the “R” word campaign. In addition, we had stickers as well as buttons that had the same message on them.

Tuesday events included two sessions of workshops. The workshops had a wide variety of topics and they were taught mostly by Self-Advocates with support from allies. At the luncheon, awards were given out. John Fitzgerald from Next Step St. Albans won the Theresa M. Wood award and Lindsey Hescock from Speak Up Addison County was awarded the second statewide Ally of the Year. Awards were also given out to a Self-Advocate and Ally of the year from each of the local groups. The Luncheon ended by a fun drumming and dancing session that got a lot of people out of the seats and dancing all around the room!

Speaking of dancing, one of the great highlights of the conference was the Monday night dance party. This is always a great time for Self-Advocates to let loose on the dance floor. The DJ played a wide range of music that fit everybody’s tastes! Even though we stay up way past our bedtime, IT’S ALWAYS WORTH IT! So, if anybody missed this year’s Conference, I hope to see you next year!
GMSA sponsored a **Safe Person** Training on February 9th, run by the Women’s Rape Crisis Center at Vermont College in Montpelier.

The meaning of a “Safe Person” is someone who can listen and support a person who chooses to disclose that they have been abused. These trainings provide self-advocates the skills to learn to listen, not judge and offer information.

GMSA just published a **Peer To Peer Guide on Domestic and Sexual Violence.** It was written by and for self-advocates to help our member understand what “abuse” is and to give guidelines to follow when you hear about abusive situations.

We have learned that people feel safe and trust their peers to talk to in this situation. Some self-advocates who have experienced abuse say that they feel uncomfortable telling their staff about it. Most staff are mandated reporters, so the issue will not remain private. This is why some self-advocates don’t want to tell staff and would rather have someone to talk to in private. So a safe person tells them how to get confidential help by calling the Vermont Network Against Domestic and Sexual Assault Hotline.

We want peers to be available for each other incase these situations come up. Also, we want people to know they can feel safe to share their experiences, without the fear of their situation going public.

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**Self Advocates Becoming Empowered Celebrates their 20th Anniversary**

- Celebrate! Have a party with your local group and show videos or make a scrapbook of your groups accomplishments.
- Talk with your Newspaper about the Anniversary and about your group's accomplishments.