GMSA Holds First Annual “Speak Up Gala!”
December 6, 2014
By Kris Medina

What a way people worked together to celebrate twenty years of Green Mountain Self-Advocates. On December 6th of 2014, people partied down at the Montpelier Elks Club. There was dinner in a beautifully decorated low lit room with an awesome dance party to follow. The desire to attend was passionate as the road conditions were not the greatest. Self-advocates, allies, families, and friends braved these rugged Vermont conditions to share the power of diversity and the power of inclusion. I was one of the handful of self-advocates asked to speak. My message was that of what many like myself would agree: self-advocacy is a right that every human deserves but most of us can’t do it alone. We need people to connect with and to support us. That is the magnificent passing life work that GMSA gives our Vermont communities. I was taken aback by the energy of the feeling of understanding that some of the family members showed. Was it that the true meaning of inclusion had finally been defined or was it the vibe of people connecting to celebrate a major channel to acceptance and quality of life with loved ones? Thank you to all of those that sponsored this event. Your support was enormously helpful. Thank you so much to all of the people that are a part of this major movement of raising awareness to everyone of us around presumption of competence.
The Steven Beck Jr, Achieve a Better Life Experience Act was signed into law on December 19, 2014. The ABLE Act is a bill that advocates, families and others alike have been working on for 6 years.

So what is the ABLE ACT?

The ABLE Act will allow people with disabilities and their families to set up tax free savings accounts to pay for basic daily living expenses like housing, education, transportation, healthcare, job training, wellness, and personal support services. While at the same time maintain eligibility for Medicaid, and SSI.

These new accounts established under the ABLE Act are similar to a “529” account (college savings account). To set up an account a person must have become disabled before age 26. This law also increases work incentives for people with disabilities by allowing them to save money, something that we haven’t really been able to do because of the $2,000 asset limit in Medicaid and Supplemental Security Income-SSI. There is also a rule that when a person with a disability passes away any money left in the account will go back to the Medicaid program. On March 10, the IRS gave a green light to move forward on setting up ABLE Act programs. Each state is going to have to pass a bill in order to set up these accounts that says who will run the ABLE Act program. GMSA has been working with the DD Council to get legislators to pass a Vermont Bill to set up the Vermont ABLE Act program.

In the long run this is going to hopefully increase the number of people working because it will give parents peace of mind that their son or daughter will be able to keep state benefits while working.

I often hear stories of businesses and parents limiting their sons or daughters’ work opportunities because they are afraid they will lose their SSI and Medicaid. I see this bill leading to greater self-sufficiency among people with disabilities. It’s long overdue that we be given equal opportunity to get ahead and be part of the middle class in this society in terms of economic status. For more information go to the National Down Syndrome Society: http://goo.gl/HRQPUX
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 disabilities.

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1st Annual Speak Up Gala!
My name is Lisa Rudiakov. I live in Bennington, VT in a level 3 group home. I have a developmental disability and feel strongly to help others. I'm a member of Peer Support in Bennington and the Developmental Services Council (DS Council) at United Counseling Services.

While on DS Council I heard about Vermont Developmental Disability Council (DD Council). I had to fill out an application to be a member of the VT DDC. The DD Council reviews the application and sends the application to the Governor and he makes the final choice for new members. They send a letter to inform you that you are a member for 4 years.

As a member of the DD Council I attend meetings every three months around the state. In the meetings we talk about things such as the budgets, trainings, conferences, etc. My goal as a member of the DD Council is to advocate for growth for Individuals with developmental disabilities through trainings and ensuring their quality of life is improved with supports that are needed. Advocacy helped me when I had to speak in front of a lot of people.

Being an advocate helps with peer interactions like showing how everyone can be confident in speaking out. My idea is never the same as someone else's. I feel being a self-advocate gives you the freedom of expression and getting across your point without hurting a person’s life style or feelings. It helped me to get on the DD Council. It helped me realize there are more things you can do. It not just about me, it's about others getting what they want and need!
How you can become a self-advocate?

Here are some ideas. I got some information about how to make comments about the budget on interactive TV. You sit in rows of seats that are usually are open to staff and clients and other organizations. The TV cameras may show different sites around the state of VT. And you can do a testimony about the budget. They give you only two minutes of speaking time and they want you to stay on topic.

When you become an advocate you also learn how to train peers and staff as well. The trainings are sometimes in different locations. I have done trainings on voting. To vote, you can go to a designated voting place, like a local school or fire department or town hall. They will give you a ballot and you can vote on local Issues or the Presidential election. I try to do both. You also can go to your local agency or your town office to register to vote. They helped me.

Another opportunity to speak up is at Developmental Disability Day at the Vermont State House in Montpelier. When you get to the State House you are going to talk to your legislators about getting what you want and need in services. You can make life better for yourself and others.

Good News!

Speaking up gets good results. I just received my paperwork from the Governor to be reappointed for the Vermont DD Council. I believe that by being on the board this will help everyone get the help they need and want. This is my passion to get the help that people with disabilities need and deserve. That's your right.

Let me ask you a question? How can you make services better and stand up for your rights?
SSDI Program is in Trouble

By: Nicole LeBlanc

Social Security has 3 programs. The first one is simply called Social Security. It is a retirement program that pays seniors 62 or older retirement benefits. The second program, Supplemental Security Income or SSI for short, provides a stipend to people who don’t work or work very little. Many Self-Advocates get SSI. The third program is called Social Security Disability Insurance, or SSDI. SSDI provides a supplementary money to people with disabilities whose ability to work is affected by their disability. You have to have worked for a while and paid social security taxes to get SSDI.

At the current moment the SSDI program is in trouble. If steps are not taken to address the problem, by 2016 it will not have enough funding to provide 100% of payout benefits.

The funding all comes from payroll taxes but the government divides the money into different “pots” to pay for the programs. In the past, Congress has moved money out of the disability program and into the retirement program. This was done in 1983 because the retirement portion of social security was facing a budget shortfall just like the SSDI part of the program is facing right now.

Due to the fact that the numbers of people on SSDI has grown during the great recession and a large portion of the workforce is increasing in age, the trust fund will pay out more in benefits than it takes in. This budget shortfall will result in SSDI benefits being cut by 20%, or a fifth, in 2016 if congress does not take appropriate action to address this matter.

Last month the Republican controlled U.S House agreed to a rule that would prevent an easy transfer from the Social Security Retirement trust fund to the disability trust fund. The last transfer of funds from the retirement fund happened in 1994 and it has been done 11 times before by both parties. The transfers of money between the two have had little impact on the retirement fund. If congress were to move money from the retirement to the disability fund, both programs would be solvent through 2033. If congress doesn’t move any money, the disability program will run out of money in late 2016 and the retirement program in 2034. Most SSDI recipients are older so helping to avoid harmful SSDI cuts benefits seniors with disabilities.
Jana Weber: Coach For A Day!

After observing me play basketball at our Special Olympics tournament last year, I got asked to be an official coach for one day for the UVM women’s basketball team. I asked why and the coach said she liked my spirit! So I was an official coach on Saturday January 4th. My husband and my Mom went with me. It was so much fun. I got to be on the sidelines and sat with the team. I also got to be a part of their huddles when they were on their time outs. I also got to be on the court when they practiced. I had a great time.

Congratulations to our Randy Lizotte and Jana Weber!

May your marriage be filled with all the right ingredients: a heap of love, a dash of humor, a touch of romance, and a spoonful of understanding. May your joy last forever. Congratulations.

Shining a light On the Vermont Developmental Disabilities Council

A heart-felt thank you from GMSA to the Council for funding this newsletter, Voices and Choices our organization over-
Springtime
By Phillip Dessert

Springtime is a lovely time of year. People go outside after being stuck indoors during winter. People are happy that it’s springtime instead of winter because there is no longer snow and they get to drive around without the roads being icy. In the warm weather you can drive around with the windows down and you get to see more of friends than when it’s not cold outside.

People get to play sports when it’s warm outside. You get to see various types of birds such as geese, ducks, robins and crows. You get to watch them as they fly into the warm weather. As animals come out of hibernation you can see them playing with each other.

There are many things that make people happy about spring. Bluebirds are just one of many things. If there were no bluebirds spring would just be boring.

The best part about spring is that flowers can grow. And people can plant things in their gardens. People relate to flowers because we both need water, sunlight and fresh air. Flowers smell great, they’re great looking, and it’s great to see the transformation from when they are seeds to big plants. Without flowers and plants there is no spring.

Where in Bennington can we plant flowers to make the community better?

I have a working relationship at the Vermont Art Exchange. I think it would be one place to plant some Daisies so that I can brighten up our community. Planting flowers at the Tennis Center where we play tennis would look nice. Daisies and roses would make that place look beautiful!

Another place is United Counseling Services. We have our own community garden so I am excited to be able to go to the garden and plant beautiful flowers!

My favorite part of spring is when then the animals come out because we get to catch frogs and go fishing. I also like spring because you get to smell the fresh air. I like lying in the grass and watching the clouds as they make different shapes. As you watch them, you think that one looks like a boat or that one is a car, I am always amazed to lay there and think to myself, “That is amazing!”

One of the other reasons we love spring is you get to have nice family picnics. That’s one reason why people like to go fishing; because they get to eat what they catch.

We get to play family activities like baseball, football, chess, hop scotch, or tennis. I also like spring because I get to ride my bike, skate board and scooters around. I also like the warm sunshine. It’s always refreshing to be in the sun!
I’ve Come a Long Way Since 2008

By Bruce Stanley

My name is Bruce Stanley. I was born in 1954 in St. Albans, VT. I moved to Canaan, VT when I was one-year-old. I went to school in Canaan for 12 years and graduated in 1972. I played with the basketball team in high school and traveled to Boston. There I met Will Chamberlain, Bill Bradley, and other famous basketball players.

While in high school I worked on a farm. In 1973 I started work at Ethan Allen in Beecher Falls: most of my family also worked there. I worked there for only one year. Over the years I worked several jobs one time in a sewing factory I ran a steam press. I was only paid two dollars an hour. In 1976, I worked for OCSA. We built houses in Derby, Irasburg and St. Johnsbury area. My job was working as a carpenter.

In 2000 I stopped taking showers. My brother and father died and I did not get Christmas cards from my family. I wasn’t very happy. I was discouraged. My mother died four years later. In 2008, I remember when my caseworker came to my apartment on the 25th of March. I was filthy and dirty and eating the wrong food. My clothes were old and dirty and too small. I had not worn socks for five or six years; my shoes were too small. My beard was down to my belly button and I had not washed my face for a long time. I got my check on the third of the month and I was broke by the middle of the month. I would borrow $200 from a guy and I would have to pay back $400. I was discouraged.

I started eating the right food. I started taking showers. I have help to shave. My caseworker got some clothes and shoes that fit me. I have come a long way. I’ve been going bowling since August 2008. I am not all out of money at the end of the month. I can go in restaurants that no one would let me in before because I had a strong odor and was not clean. I went to restaurants in Island Pond.

I take the right pills now. I’m not so hyper and I started seeing a doctor all alone. Before, sometimes I would lose my groceries on the ground. Now people take me shopping. Before people would not speak to me. Not even a stranger would say hello. This summer I went to camp in Ripton and had fun. My bathroom was dirty and black. Now it is 200% better. My bedroom is clean and I have sheets on my bed. Now people help me every day and I can go to McDonald's. I sleep better now. Today I do my dishes, take out the rubbish, shave, and cut my own hair. A year ago I started going to Global Campus and self-advocates group. I took a trip to Washington DC in 2012. I’ve come a long way since 2008. I hope to find a girlfriend.
Welcome to the Employment Corner!  

Employment is one of the biggest topics for people with developmental and Intellectual disabilities. In 2014 I started reading and learning about employment for people with disabilities and this also included Sheltered Workshops. This got me totally motivated to do some old fashioned research on the computer and I was enthralled by it. The best part about doing this research was reading these fascinating articles and publications. This sparked a light within me and I started working on a research paper about Sheltered Workshops.

While I was doing this research I learned something new about myself. I learned that I wanted to be a researcher and I enjoy doing it. I'm passionate about researching these topics of employment and sheltered workshops.

In February I found this great opportunity to take a fantastic online class on Career Development for two weeks. It was through the Training Resource Network. I wanted to take this interesting-sounding class to help with my career goals. My roommates told me to go for it and that they totally support me for taking this intense class. I couldn't wait to take it. I like doing challenging things and I was up to the challenge.

I learned many things about working in the field of career development. I did a lot of technical reading. The class was set up with four categories: Principles of Career planning, Vocational assessments, Career Development skills and Vocational Profiles. Each of these sections had 49 other topics relating to these sections. The class had a discussion board, so I wrote two posts each day. At the end of class there was a test and you had to score 70% to pass it. On my first try of taking this test I scored 65%, but the format of the test was multiple choice which was hard for me. It felt like taking a regular college class again, but it was online.

There are five pieces of advice I would like to share with everyone about taking an online class.

1. If you decide to take an online class, make sure you have the time to do all the homework and reading.
2. Decide what class you are interested in taking.
3. Ask yourself why are you taking this class? Are you planning to advance your education, job or get more training?
4. You can't always be perfect, but there are ways to improve.
5. Be passionate about it & follow your heart.

I'm glad I advocated for this web class and I don't regret it one bit. Someday, I would like to start my own company about Employment and Video productions. This company will help people with disabilities find Employment and work to improve their skills. I want to create video stories and documentaries about employment topics. I made a group on Facebook called “The Employment Corner” and the main focus of this group is to help young adults with disabilities transition to supported employment instead of Sheltered Workshops. We need to work together as a team to make this a reality if possible. I'm proud to say we now have 207 members in the group.
North East Advocates Together (NEAT)…
Some Technology We Are Using to Connect Across States! Check it Out!

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>What Do We Use It For?</th>
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| Facebook | • Connect to other people and groups  
  • Post Fun Social Media Facts  
  • Post Meeting Reminders  
  • Post photos and videos  
  • Create a photo album  
  • Have a place for the Advisory group to chat and share documents and ideas  
  • Have a page where the public can see what we are up to and follow our activity  
  • You can share links and see other people’s links  
  • Post polls and surveys | • It is easy to Connect with Friends and organizations  
  • It is free.  
  • You can set up groups and pages that are both public (for everyone to see) and private (for only people you want).  
  • You can share pictures and videos.  
  • You can do surveys.  
  • You can host an event.  
  • You can use it to send messages to people or to groups.  
  • You can connect groups to each other.  
  • You can start a campaign or ask people to take action on something! | • You have to sign up for an account.  
  • It can be hard when they change the ways things look on the website.  
  • It is updated a lot so you are always need to learn the new way that it looks.  
  • You need to look at the privacy information really carefully and have good privacy settings set up.  
  • You need Internet. |
| Doodle | • We use Doodle to schedule meetings when we need to find a time that works for lots of people.  
  We use it to schedule our monthly Advisory Group meeting and other events like trainings. | • It makes planning a meeting so much easier.  
  • It is free and you do not need an account.  
  • After everyone fills out their answers (which they can do from home, library, office, wherever they are), the website tells you what the best dates/times for the meeting are. | • You need Internet. |
Local Self-Advocacy Contacts

Advocates for Action
Call Tammy Maberry at 802-463-3532 ext. 3147. Meetings 1st Wednesday in Bellows Falls.

Bennington Peer Support
Call Dawn Danner 802-442-5491 ext. 285. Meetings are the 3rd Thursday of every month.

BSAC - Burlington Self-Advocacy Club
Call Jayne Weber 488-6500. Meetings are every other Friday in Burlington.

CAT - Capitol Advocates Together
Call Kaiya Andrews or Karen Topper at 249-6659. Meetings are 2nd Thursday in Montpelier.

Champlain Voices
Call Emily Andersen or Taylor at 238-4540. Meetings are every Monday in Colchester.

Communication Alliance
Call Tracey Thresher or Rachel Perkins at 479-2502 ext. 557. Meetings are the 1st & 3rd Wednesdays in Barre.

COPS - Connections of Peer Support
Call Liz Peets or Bart Mair at 866-1833. Meetings are 1st Monday night of the month.

Families First Peer Group
Call Greg Masterson or Sara Salasin at 275-4919. Meetings on Tuesdays in Brattleboro.

Friends Helping Friends
Call Wendy Capobianco or Rachel MacMartin at 479-4076. Meetings are on 2nd Monday during the day and 3rd Thursday evening.

GATSA Getting Acquainted Through Self-Advocacy
Call Lori Jones or Patti Mack at 888-5026. Meetings are 1st & 3rd Monday in Morrisville.

LBGTQ - Support Groups for Self-Advocates Who are Gay
Two are groups supported by the Pride Center & GMSA that meet once a week. Meetings are in St. Albans & Burlington. Call David at 503-2251.

Next Step Self-Advocates of St. Albans
Call Sydnee Boyd or Randy Lizotte at 782-3407. Meetings are the 2nd and 4th Fridays in St Albans.

Our Drop In Center
Call Stephanie DeCesare at 334-7310. They are their every day during the week in Newport.

Rockin’ Advocates of Central Vermont
Call Jen Olsen 476-4811 room 134. Meetings are Thursdays once a month in Barre.

RAPS - Randolph Area Peer Support
Call Susan Hawley at 728-4476. Meetings are twice a month on Tuesday.

Dream Catchers
Call Jessalyn Gustin at 775-2381. Meetings are 4th Friday in Rutland.

Self-Advocates Becoming Empowered of Rutland
Call Lisa Lynch or Tammy Lethridge at 775-1370. Meetings are on the 2nd Tuesday of the month.

Speak Up Addison County
Call Rebecca Holbrook at 399-4798. Meetings three Thursdays in Middlebury.

SAVY - Self-Advocates Voices or You
Call Patty Grassette or Gina Brown at 888-2417. Meetings are on Friday twice a month.

Vermont Choices
Call Jacqueline Beer at 748-6350 ext. 1121. Meetings on Wednesdays in St. Johnsbury.

Windsor Self-Advocates
Call Jamie Dickinson at 886-4567 ext. 2778. Meetings 2nd Monday in Windsor 2 to 3