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**J.R.H. 2 - Joint resolution sincerely apologizing and expressing sorrow and regret to all individual Vermonters and their families and descendants who were harmed as a result of State-sanctioned eugenics policies and practices**

My name is Max Barrows. I live in Worcester, VT. I'm a person with Autism. I work for Green Mountain Self-Advocates. We support J.R.H.2. My comments will focus on institutionalization. Sterilization was a horrific result of eugenics but segregation into institutions was the final solution.

The state of Vermont opened the Vermont State School for Feebleminded Children in 1913. Its name was later changed to the Brandon Training School. It is hard to believe that at one time over 600 people lived there. And over the years a total of 2,324 people lived isolated and segregated lives at Brandon Training School until it closed in 1993.

Green Mountain Self-Advocates (GMSA) was established in 1994 by former residents of Brandon Training School. They knew that just because the institution closed, the attitudes that built the institution still existed. GMSA is about supporting people with intellectual and developmental disabilities to find their voice and live the life they choose like other Vermonters. We are a statewide disability rights organization, and we support our peers through 20+ self-advocacy groups meeting throughout the state.

I want to quote a fellow Vermonter, Larry Bissonnette, an internationally known disability rights activist and artist. Larry uses a tablet to type his words to communicate. Larry said,

*"Many years ago, most of my existence was spent behind the institutional walls of Brandon Training School. I am free of those walls now, but*

*attitudinal walls are still very much placing large, enveloped by ignorance, jackets of segregation around the lives of people with disabilities and especially, those that don't speak. All of us self-advocates must make waves of change pour over malls and places of leaders of government, moving mountains and clearing paths of acceptance."*

Larry is one of my mentors. I love his honesty and directness.

Personally, I have never experienced living in an institution, but as a person with a disability, I am outraged that this happened and continues to happen across the country. Now, I would like to introduce Susan Aichroth. She will reflect on growing up in Brandon Training School. After Susan speaks I will add a few more comments.

### **TESTIMONY BY SUSAN AICHROTH**

My name is Susan Aichroth. I live in Shelburne Vermont. Being in Brandon Training School was like a prison. Like when you go to jail like a criminal.

My parents didn't want me. They thought I was a problem child.

At Brandon, I spent all my time chasing other clients. The staff were not around. Every day was basically going from the workshop back to the dorm. That was my whole life. I didn't have any friends. I didn't know any better. I just felt like a criminal. And I knew other people felt that way too.

I mean everybody should be out in the community learning more things and getting different supports. Not many people had choices of what they did and how they did it. The staff would make that choice if they were around more but there weren't.

You weren't getting an education. They didn't care about us at Brandon. We got away with more than we got punished.

There was a men's cottage and a women's cottage. I have been through a lot. I got molested. I got abused. I got thrown down on the floor. Like I said, my parents, didn't want me. Because I had seizures and things. Nobody cared about me. Nobody looked out for me. I had to look out for myself.

Now I live in Shelburne.

Green Mountain Self-Advocates taught me to be a self-advocate. As a self-advocate, I want to look out for other people with disabilities. I want people to

look at reality. Reality means how things really are. The truth is that people with disabilities have gifts and should not be shy.

It was hard to learn how to speak up. I was afraid. People would laugh at me. They would label me and make fun of me. But I kept speaking up. And eventually, I got to speak at public meetings and conferences.

And guess what? When I spoke up at meetings no one made fun of me. In fact, they appreciated and encouraged me. People wanted to hear my voice. My message to other people with disabilities is to speak up, you can do it.

### **CONTINUED TESTIMONY BY MAX BARROWS**

You may feel some relief knowing Susan's and Larry's description of Brandon is in the past, but how often do you hear someone use the word "retarded?" It is a common insult that is usually ignored and rarely corrected.

It is troubling that Vermont students with disabilities are nearly 3 times more likely than students without disabilities to be suspended. And, the use of exclusionary discipline, restraint, seclusion, referral to law enforcement, and school-related arrest varies widely.

And last year, when COVID-19 hit, we were deeply disturbed to learn that people with disabilities were put at the back of the line when it came to getting treated. The US Agency of Human Services, Office of Civil Rights and disability advocates sprang into action challenging hospitals in Tennessee, Alabama, Pennsylvania and Washington for discriminating against people with disabilities when rationing medical care during the COVID-19 pandemic. In Vermont, we also worked to change the wording of hospital policies to make sure that having a disability cannot be used as criteria for restricting access to a ventilator and other medical treatment.

Today people with disabilities have rights, but people do not always respect our rights and choices. Our society is set up to make it hard for people with disabilities to use their rights. People with disabilities, as a group, are treated unfairly because of our disabilities. This is called ableism. Often people with disabilities are left out because the world is not built with us in mind. For example

- A lot of buildings are built so wheelchair users can't get in.
- Newspapers are printed too small for people with low vision to read.

It is so common for us to be left out that you might not even notice that it is happening.

Just like sexism and racism, people with disabilities, as a group, experience discrimination. Ableism is part of the fabric of our society.

- People are more likely to hurt or abuse people with disabilities. Some people think our disabilities make it okay to hurt us. If someone hurts us, people might not do anything about it.
- People might think we cannot make our own choices. They might treat us like kids even when we are adults. They might try to control our lives.

Ableism is not just about how one person treats another person. Being polite to people with disabilities will not eradicate ableism.

Ableism affects decisions people make about our lives. These decisions add up. Sometimes they turn into laws or programs that treat disabled people unfairly. For example, people with disabilities are often discriminated against in education, health care, and law enforcement.

Disabled people don't have the same opportunities in life. They might be kept apart from other people. Ableism can make us feel bad about ourselves as disabled people. This is called internalized ableism. Ableism can make us think we deserve to be treated badly.

And it gets more complicated. If you have more than one thing that makes you different as a person, you deal with more of the "isms." As a Black man with autism, when I am doing anti-racism work I need to have my disability experience understood and when I am working as a disability advocate I need others to consider how being Black impacts my world.

Again, thanks for taking the time to hear our experiences and work on a formal apology. This resolution brings to light the horrific practices of eugenics. We cannot forget what has happened. As you have demonstrated this week, listening to those who have been left behind in the past is a vital step. We need to learn from our past mistakes. We need to amp-up Vermont's efforts to get rid of racism and ableism in all facets of state government. We look forward to working with you to make it right, to figure out what needs to happen to correct for this terrible mistake.

My final comments are to remind us of the promise made by Governor Howard Dean when Brandon Training School closed in 1993. Governor Dean said, *“I’m proud to maintain the commitment to the state to the very kind of services that we still owe to the population that was once at Brandon and is now in the community. We will continue to assure that individuals receive support & services; We will continue to assure that those services meet acceptable levels of quality; We will continue to assure that persons receiving the services are free from abuse and neglect or mistreatment; To assure that the folks taking care of the people needing these services have adequate training & support. So, our commitment does not end with the closing of this institution. Our commitment continues.”*

Thank you for listening to our testimony. I look forward to sharing your powerful apology with youth with disabilities when I teach them about the history of disability rights. I will share Vermont’s ongoing commitment to inclusion and serving and supporting people with developmental disabilities.

*Maxwell W. Barrows*

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