

Award: Lester T. Pritchard Citizen Leadership Award

Recipient: Jennifer Knapp, Founder and Executive Director of Community Choices

Presenter: Barb Pritchard

Good evening. I'm Barb Pritchard, and I'm the Co-Chair of the Health Care Consumers Board of Directors.

It's an honor not only to be the presenter of the Lester Pritchard Citizen Activist Award, but I feel privileged to be able to give this award to an incredible person.

This Award, named in memoriam after my late husband Lester honors Citizen Leaders whose activism demonstrates a dedication to the pursuit of justice and civil rights.

I'm thrilled to be presenting the Lester T Pritchard Citizen Leadership Award to Jennifer Knapp, the founder and Executive Director of Community Choices.

My late husband Lester and I met Jen Knapp in 2003 through our connection with Bob Husband, a communications professor at the University of Illinois where Jen had been his student for several years. Lester and Bob had talked over coffee of Lester's desire to have the assistance of students in working on grass roots advocacy for the disability community in Illinois.

Lester and Jen had almost instant connection. Jen never seemed at a loss when she couldn't understand Lester. She'd worked with folks with disabilities before and his speech difficulties were fairly easy for her to understand. Recently she told me that she knew she could help people, but she really wasn't sure if she could be an organizer for grass roots advocacy.

Over the next 6 years, we had the pleasure of starting a statewide campaign to help individuals who were living in large state operated congregate care settings have the ability to move into the community. Lester was a visionary, a strategist, a negotiator and an activist. We hired Jen as our lead organizer for the Campaign for Real Choice in Illinois.

One of her main duties and perhaps the most challenging duty was to take Lester's visions and turn them into reality. She was able to create successful campaigns where we educated the disability community on the need for community living for folks with intellectual and developmental disabilities. We also had to show the state that this was something the disability community believed in and felt strongly enough to get behind.

Jen, Lester and I traveled the State for about a year talking to other activists, parents of adult children with developmental disabilities, Legislators and folks involved in State government, as well as folks involved with other states who had made closing their state run institutions a reality.

Jen and Lester created opportunities for the disability community and the general public to send letters to the governor and his staff and legislators as well as developing dramatizations to enable folks to talk about life in institutions.

Jen and Lester created testimony for Legislative hearings and we all got very familiar with the roads between Champaign and Springfield.

Jen was the lead organizer on 2 huge events where we even took to the road and spread our message in successive press events. In 2005 we had the Freedom Ride, where 29 of us were in 9 vehicles, and we traveled 700 miles in 4 days making at least 2 press events each day.

A few years later, we had another big road trip involving 3 routes and 13 press events in 2 days with 115 folks with disabilities and their supporters. This culminated at 2 rallies at the capitol, bringing more people with disabilities than we've ever seen at the capitol before.

From there Lester began to set Jen up with a new endeavor. We had learned from local research that folks with developmental disabilities and their families often wanted something different than service local providers were offering. As a result, Jen founded what is now known as Community Choices.

Community Choices is a small grassroots non-profit organization that partners with people with developmental disabilities in Champaign County to achieve independence, opportunity, and choice. Community Choices works to bring together individuals who use services, and their families, empowering them to direct and control the services they need. Community Choices was incorporated in 2008 as a result of grassroots organizing with affected consumers and their families, which identified a need for this kind of organization.

In the more than 6 years of operation, the group has more than 50 participant families.

Additionally, Jen has worked tirelessly on creating connections to strengthen community services for folks with disabilities not only in Champaign/Urbana but throughout the state.

But now, Jen's life is taking her away from Illinois and she will be moving out of state this summer. Our community will miss her badly, but Jen's leadership has ensured that Community Choices is a strong organization, with plenty of strong and capable leaders, and the organization and its important work will continue even in her absence.

Jen, we will miss you and we wish you the best.

Jen's a gifted talented woman who often times feels like my Mom, my Sister, but mostly I know that she's one of my closest friends and, on behalf of the CCHCC Board of Directors and Lester, I am proud to present you with the Lester Pritchard Citizen Activist Award.