

Sibling's Perspective

My Sister Jean

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By Colleen Lutkevich, Executive Director, Massachusetts Coalition of Families and Advocates (COFAR.org)

My mother was nine months pregnant with me when my older sister, Jean, six years old, was placed at what was then called the Wrentham State School. My other sister was twelve, and my younger sister was born two years after me.

This is the story I grew up with, and it was not a happy one.

At that time, Wrentham was a place of last resort. There were really no other options for individuals with intellectual disabilities. From the beginning, my parents were actively involved in the parents association at Wrentham, and my younger sister and I grew up coloring in the back of the room while they attending monthly meetings. Jean came home with us every Sunday, and that was our routine.

As time went on, conditions at Wrentham deteriorated greatly. My parents along with several other activist families filed a federal class action lawsuit (*Ricci v. Okin*), resulting in a consent decree that was the beginning of great improvements not only at the newly named Wrentham Developmental Center, but across Massachusetts. I was a high school student by this time, and the beginning of my advocacy was driving a carload of my friends across a picket line at Wrentham during a strike in order to provide care for residents when many staff walked off the job.

Under Judge Joseph Tauro conditions improved over the years to the point where staffing and care at WDC is second to none, and my sister resides in her own room in a beautiful cottage on the grounds. All residents at Wrentham now have these excellent living conditions. More importantly, the medical, nursing, and supportive services are excellent, resulting in a quality of life for the residents that could not have been imagined in the 1960's.

Jean is now 61 years old. She is nonverbal, with autism, extremely low intellectual functioning, and many other difficulties. It is my sincere hope that she will be able to live out her life in the comfort and security of Wrentham Developmental Center, among staff and friends who know and love her. I know if her way of life is threatened, this time it will be my sisters and me on the picket line.



Top, L-R: John Sullivan, Laura (sister), Colleen Lutkevich. Bottom, L-R: Gladys Sullivan, Jean (sister), Joyce (sister)