

Daniel W. Norris - Testimony before the Ohio House Finance, Health & Human Services Committee March 17, 2015

Ladies and gentlemen you have the privilege today in your jobs as legislators in the state of Ohio to help me create my life's legacy.

I'm Dan Norris. I come today with a simple story of a family of five people whose lives are substantially affected by the work you do. You have been presented days and days of testimony regarding statistics, funding streams, statutory definitions, sheltered workshops, facility-based programs. You have that information if you need it.

Sally, Dan, Kate, Jake and Joe are here to give you their stories.

My wife **Sally Winston-Norris** with whom I will celebrate our 35th wedding anniversary this year, has dedicated her life from teen years forward to the service of others. The first full-time job out of college with a degree from Miami University was as a social worker doing placement of special needs children and multiple sibling groups. Several months into our dating, when I picked her up one night she posed a simple question, would I be open to adopting children. Since I'm adopted myself, yes. Okay would you be open to adopting five children from the same family. Well probably we should date a little more, and get married first. She had a set of children needing a new family, their parents were killed by a drunk driver. She ultimately placed those children with an incredibly loving farm family.

Thus started our life in the disability community. She then went on to work for 25 years with legal aid of Cincinnati as an advocate in the area of Medicaid and disability services. She also spearheaded the placement of group homes for the disabled in the most affluent neighborhoods in Cincinnati. Over the last 35 years she's lived a courageous life of a mother taking care of three children. She also faced bouts of cancer, crippling rheumatoid arthritis and debilitating pain. She has done all this with joy, grace and a humbling dignity.

Kathleen Clare Norris, Kate. 30 year's old beautiful, brilliant, a triathlete, graduating from Kenyon College, magna cum laude. From early teenage years on dedicated her spare time to animal rescue shelters, soup kitchens for the homeless, centers for adults with disabilities, and disabled veterans. Five years ago she was well on her path to law school, and the career helping disabled veterans obtain the benefits they desperately need. Married, with a beautiful home, life had only great possibilities. In 2015 she faces new challenges of being legally blind and crippled with Lyme disease, lupus and Sjogren's. Divorced in the last year, unable to currently reside in her house, on Medicaid and Social Security disability, she must apply all of the strength and wisdom she has obtained in her short life in charting out her future with new limitations. She will depend on your wisdom to assist her in getting back on her feet to obtain that goal as a brilliant and witty legal advocate for US veterans.

Jacob Winston Norris, Jake. 25 years old, handsome, strong, funny and heckuva dancer. He also has been diagnosed with mental retardation and severe developmental disability since birth. He functions at a 2 to 3-year-old level and at 6 foot five is still incontinent, in diapers and non verbal. One moment can be joyous and have a raucous laugh the next moment chewing on his bloodied knuckles with a guttural rage. He currently lives at safe Haven Farms, a community my wife and I have had the privilege of helping create and finance over the last five years.

Joseph Daniel Norris, Joe, 23 years old 6 foot four, strong as an ox, brilliant of mind and the inquisitive by nature. Having spent a childhood caring for his older brother, Joe has a genetic predisposition to serving the disabled and the poor. He is established in his own residence, looking forward to an exciting future with an already developing career in commercial construction and a budding romantic relationship. This last weekend, while discussing the exciting and scary prospect of popping the question to the beautiful woman in his life, in his young wisdom, he posed the serious questions of how to care for his brother and sister when my wife and I are gone.

That is why I'm here today. You are part of my legacy to my children.

As I addressed my son's question I explained to him that my future is very simple. I may be given a day or 40 years but every breath in that time span will be dedicated to caring for his mother, brother and sister and preparing a solid foundation for their future. I have already accomplished more than my life's goals. I have had the privilege of representing thousands of disabled veterans and other disabled clients before federal and state judicial systems as an attorney. I've climbed mountains, kayak rivers, raced marathons, biked across Death Valley, flown planes over the vast and wondrous territories of this country, rode motorcycles through glorious mountains and had the blessing of 35 years sharing this life with Sally.

All of my resources and acquired wisdom are focused on protecting the future for Kate, Jake and Joe.

Director Martin has testified that the state is threatened by organizations like DRO with the possibility of legal actions. This organization and others have grossly misconstrued the *Olmstead Decision*, and have attempted to apply a remedy for a narrow problem, across the spectrum of Services for the Disabled. DRO represents small percentage of highly functional disabled. It is clear that underlying assumption of the social engineering project is that society will embrace the severely disabled in loving understanding if we force everyone into integrated community-based living situations. We will all learn to just get along. By reducing options for many who are unable to function on their own, we will somehow create a more loving and forgiving society. **Bullshit!!**

I can assure you that my stake in these issues is rooted far more deeply than an organization like DRO. The chances that you will see me in a legal action protecting diverse needs of the severely disabled are almost a certainty. One more lawsuit, one more legal forum, one more administrative challenge is a small price for me to pay. **This is my life legacy.**

My daughter Kate, although facing new challenges, is able to speak for herself and will ultimately rise to be a formidable advocate for others. My son Jake might someday be potty trained. He may expand his vocabulary and be able to articulate a desire for milk versus juice. Their needs are vastly different. The attempt by the privileged few to use the same solutions to both sets of challenges is illogical and disingenuous at best.

I'm demanding that this legislative body take action to maintain the current sheltered workshops/adult day service system in Ohio which are the most appropriate, least restrictive, and best outcome producing environments for the most physically and cognitively disabled. The scope of the proposed changes is reckless and the risk to our adult children and other disabled adults in Ohio is too severe. Ohio needs to maintain as many choices as it can and make incremental changes in order to reflect the wide range of services that Ohio's disabled citizens and their families desperately still require.

Thank you for your service. I will see you again. You will see my daughter Kathleen as she finds her place in her new reality.

When I'm gone, this obligation, I live for each day, will be carried on by **the next generation of advocates, Kate, Jake and Joe.**

They are my legacy. And now you are part of that legacy.

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