

Roberta Privette
230 Beaumont Trail
Aurora OH 44202
330-995-0429

I am the legal guardian for my sister, Melanie Swanson, who has resided at YDC for about 10 years. My "little" sister is 53. I am 56.

Melanie has never spoken 1 word. As an infant she cried incessantly. Mom was told she'd live 1 year. Torturous tests and hospital stays determined she was severely autistic, perhaps part deaf, and just an accident of chromosomal bad luck.

As a young child she ran around and walked on the back of the sofa, on top of the swingset...waved her hands around and made sounds. She would take a piece of paper and over time turn it into a snowflake of sorts, peeling it into a chandelier, never ripping any part off, then dangling it before her eyes. When listening to music she would rock back and forth, expressing her enjoyment, and make sounds like open mouthed humming.

She fed and toiletted herself until the seizures began, age 13. Neurologists had predicted her sure death by now. She wore a helmet and proceeded to fall a lot. After myriad of medications she lost her mobility (or perhaps after many grand mal seizures).

Finally my poor mother gave in to years of pushing by experts to "institutionalize" her. We were in NJ and Mel went to Woodbridge Developmental Center. When we moved to Ohio 17 years ago (for work) we needed Melanie to move too. It was a miracle when there was an opening in Youngstown Developmental Center.

YDC is no "institution". It's a home. Many of those who work in the field and who are employed at YDC have a story about a family member with disabilities. I'm struck by the level of caring we've had. In her prior facility Mel was in the hospital with severe dehydration and frequently suffered anemia and anorexia. YDC is totally different and these conditions are unimaginable here. Her caregivers love her. While some must be in it for a job, it's very obvious if you spend time here that most are in it with their hearts. Melanie has flourished. We celebrated her weight gain during the first couple of years at YDC since it was such a worry in NJ. At one point we were concerned she was putting on a couple too many pounds!

Melanie spends much of her day slumped in a wheel chair, head down. She is on a lot of medications and cannot do anything on her own. There is special equipment at YDC for changing and cleaning - a very difficult and necessary chore. Her caregivers must help her eat -- her coordination is terrible. We laugh that she will grab a drink with a long unsteady arm and spill it all over the place.

Melanie loves. She shows her love to her caregivers with heavy breathing/sighing and long arms going out for a hug of sorts. She has preferences in food. If she really does not like something or is full she will turn her head away and clamp her mouth closed. It's not much of a life (say we of the agony and frustration of our small world) but it's the only life she's ever had.

I love my sister... I gave up praying for miracles long ago. Now I pray for the miracle of kind & knowledgeable care to continue at YDC. Ohio really is a kinder and gentler state. I pray we can keep it that way.

Over recent years we have been approached with offers to move Mel to a private group home -- the first offer brought me to tears. It was explained we needn't do it, only the offers are required by a federal guideline seeking Private, Normal - like lives for the disabled. REALLY? Mel needs privacy and the normalcy some bureaucratic organization deems necessary? No. These people have the best they can possibly get at this facility.

I'm NOT for government taking care of everything. I'm for LESS government. I'm not even for Unions (sorry-don't hate me). But when it comes to the care of the truly helpless AND when I look at a facility that is amazing in it's ability to care, I see there is a place for both.