

Ricardo Thornton Testimony

Good afternoon Mr. Chairman and members of the committee. My name is Ricardo Thornton. My wife Donna and I are both here to testify on where we've been. We're here to talk about the past, the present, and the future.

We both lived in institutions all our lives. I lived in DC Village, then I moved to Forest Haven. At the institutions, you had good staff, and you had bad staff. People working with us didn't know the type of services that we really needed. Being in an institution felt like I was doing time for a crime I didn't commit. We hoped one day we'd get out of the system and be like everybody else.

At Forest Haven you didn't control your own money, so if you got paid for a job, you had to turn in your money. We tried to cash our check once. The punishment was, if you cash your check, you don't get your allowance.

One of the things I learned down at the institution was I had a brother and a sister. They were there waiting for me. I was a little hesitant because I didn't know my family then. But then I got to meet them. My brother was always withdrawing from me because he didn't know who I was at the time. My sister was always happy because she knew she had a brother now who would look out for her. My sister, she passed at the institution at one of the cottages. They said it was a heart attack, but I know it was something else. I think more likely she died of an overdose of medicine. To control her they would keep her drugged like a zombie. When that happened, I told myself I would advocate for change, so hopefully no one would have to live in an institution.

Moving into the community was a challenge. It's an adjustment. The rules were still with us. We thought we would be more independent, but group homes have their own style. At some group homes, you didn't have choices. Now, we have choices.

After I left the institution I was appointed by the Mayor to serve on the deinstitutionalization board. The board served to monitor group homes in the community and make sure everyone was safe. We were not satisfied until everyone in an institution had moved out safely.

My wife and I both work within our community. I work at the Martin Luther King Library. November will be my 36 years. We used to live in our apartment. We now live in a new home. We have walk-in supervision. You don't have anybody standing over you saying "do this, do that." You're pretty much independent.

I serve on the DD council board, the state planning council. I'm the vice chair of that board. I also served on the Mayor's committee and I'm active on Project ACTION! Self-Advocacy and a number of coalitions. I'm also very active in Special Olympics. I had a chance to go to South Africa and be part of the leadership training over there. It was very educational for me.

We have one son, and when he was born there were questions about us, can we really be good parents to him. They said, "Maybe you may want to think about putting him up for adoption." And we had to convince and show them, with the support we had. We put him in Head Start, and after that he went on to school. He graduated from Calvin Coolidge High School in 2000. The trick was that we worked with his teachers. We asked for extra help in finding out what does he need to do. We had to show the people that said it couldn't be done, that it can be done. We're like any other parent – whatever we can do to help him, we do it.

Today he's now 26. He has his own family. He's married with kids. They're happy. I have two pictures I want to show you. This picture was taken in 1984 when we went and got married. The odds were against us. We did it anyway. And in the next picture, we have the whole family. This is us and our grandkids. So that's the future.

Where do we go from here, Mr. Chairman? We'd like to see more people living more independent lives in the community. Transitioning from school to work is getting better, but we still need a little more work. People with intellectual disabilities graduating from high school today, if they cannot think of what it is that they would like to do, their career choice, maybe give them some assistance and some ideas.

I also want to talk about RSA rehabilitation services. Many are being promised jobs and some are getting them and some for some reason are not. There seems to be a big block that sits and I wonder if it can be moved so that many people who come through their doors can have the opportunity. Many people say they want to work and they're still waiting. Maybe we can come up with some kind of solution.

Let's not look back at the institution as an answer. Let's look forward to the future.

Thank you Mr. Chair for letting us speak here today, and we look forward to answering any questions.