Like

MetroWest
Center For
Independent Living

People with Disabilities
Living in the Community

Dear Paul,

Over the 4th of July weekend, we lost an outstanding individual and hero, Elmer Bartels.

I first met Elmer in 1972. He was the first working adult with a disability I had ever seen and he impressed me greatly.

Elmer was injured at the age of 22, and finished his degree at Colby College. He went on to get a graduate degree in physics from Tufts. His first jobs were at the MIT Lab for Nuclear Science, and at Honeywell Information Systems. Meanwhile, he helped establish the MA Association of Paraplegics, and his advocacy career began. Governor Dukakis appointed Bartels as the MRC Commissioner in 1977. Bartels took a leave of absence from Honeywell, and then stayed at MRC for 30 years!

Elmer's approach is very different from mine so we didn't always see eye to eye, but he was a great leader, mentor and advocate for people with disabilities. Even after he retired, he would want to know what was going on, how I was doing and what was new. He was a true advocate who never stopped making a difference. We will miss him greatly.

Sincerely,

Paul W. Spooner, Executive Director
MetroWest Center for Independent Living

MWCIL

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20 Years
Americans with Disabilities Act
July 26th celebrating 20 years of the ADA

Commissioner Carr (left) and former Commissioner Bartels at the 2013 MWCIL Gala

From MRC Commissioner Charles Carr

..." Elmer was commissioner of MRC from 1977 until 2007 and during this time he gave every bit of passion and intelligence to build MRC into a premier public vocational rehabilitation agency. He also had the foresight to develop an Independent Living Division in the mid 80's well before other VR agencies realized the importance of community living for people with disabilities outside of institutional settings. He was a strong advocate in the very early days for architectural barrier removal, integrated public education, and assistive technology and many other basic civil rights program, including the American Disability Act (ADA)."

From The Easter Seals

" We mourn the loss of our friend Elmer C. Bartels - former Easter Seals board member, former Mass. Rehab Commissioner and long-time champion of equal rights for people with disabilities. No one has done more to expand independence and opportunity. The disability community counted on Elmer for his leadership, wisdom and perspective. He was a mentor to so many. He will be sorely missed."

Obituary from Elmer Bartels' daughter

On July 5, 2014, I lost my dad, Elmer C. Bartels, less than a month after his 76th birthday and 54 years after he was injured in a hockey accident that resulted in a life changing spinal cord injury. Being paralyzed from the upper chest down for so long did not make him a hero and he did not identify himself through his disability. He was a man who was faced with a challenge, and with the highest level of focus and exuberance, he figured out how to live life to the fullest while simultaneously helping others in the same boat. That's what made him a hero.

The third of four children, my dad was born on June 10, 1938 to Elmer and Dorothy Bartels. He was a happy, carefree kid and his youth was filled with wonderful, simple things like playing with his Lionel train set assembled on top of the ping pong table in his basement, hanging out with friends, identifying birds or enjoying family activities with his sisters, Jane Lee, Patsy and Dorothy, and setting up a camp site in the lot next to his home in the Oak Hill section of Newton, Mass.

When Elmer was 12, he spent the first of 10 summers at Camp Agawam, a boys camp in Raymond, Maine. He loved everything about Agawam - the traditions, the focus on leadership and goal-setting, the activities, and lifelong friendships. Sixty-four years later he remained involved with Agawam, serving as a life board member, visiting the campus as often as possible, and donating fishing rods, camping supplies, and tools for the wood shop. "Bartels Hut" offers nature instruction to campers, and there is a campership program established in his name. There is no doubt that Agawam was a huge influence on Elmer's life.

After high school, Elmer went to Hebron Academy in Maine to sharpen his academic skills, and then attended Colby College in Waterville to study physics. There, Elmer became a fraternity brother with Sigma Theta Psi and met some of his closest friends. He succeeded academically, took on extra projects with his physics professor, and had a great time. The combination of Colby College during the school year and Camp Agawam as a counselor in the summer was perfect, and he told me years later that he felt at that time as though he had the world by the tail.

On December 5, 1960, Elmer's life changed forever. During a fraternity pick-up hockey game at Colby, he tripped on the ice and slammed head first into the backboards, instantly severing his spinal cord at the C4/5 level. That meant he'd be a quadriplegic - paralyzed with very limited use of his upper arms and unable to walk - for the rest of his life. He was 22. In 1960, things were much different than they are today for people with disabilities and certainly there was no real encouragement or prospects for an independent life.

Fortunately, in June, 1961, Elmer met the woman who would become his wife and my mom - his nurse Mary Foster - while at the Lemuel Shattuck Hospital in Jamaica Plain. He was attracted to her dark, sparkling eyes and can-do attitude. Meeting her gave him confidence that he could indeed live a meaningful life, so they decided to figure things out along the way together.

Elmer and Mary were married the day after he was discharged from the Shattuck, and two days later they went back to Colby College to redo his senior year and graduate. After I was born in 1962, my father attended Tufts University where he earned his graduate degree in physics and then got his first professional job as a scientific computer programmer at the MIT Lab for Nuclear Science. In order to work, Elmer needed some ingenuity, like an electric typewriter (new at the time), using inverted pencils in his wrist splints so he could type, a table instead of a desk, and elevated computer equipment. With the new job came a new home in Bedford, Mass. where my parents were actively involved in the community.

In 1968, Dad started to work for Honeywell Information Systems, first in Waltham, then in Billerica, Mass., starting as a programmer, then as department head and systems analyst. My mom would drive him to work every day and go back to pick him up, and while there Dad would use his early computer skills to develop software and eventually lead a department of 35 software engineers.

During the time he was figuring out marriage, parenthood and his career, Elmer helped to establish the Massachusetts Association of Paraplegics with a group of friends who were motivated to fight for things like accessible public buildings and equal employment. MAP was the start of his advocacy efforts and he got a real boot out of how effective they were as a group. He was involved in many organizations such as Easter Seals and the Boston Center for Independent Living - too numerous to mention.

In 1972, our family grew with the arrival of my brother Jimmy, and the four of us were really just a typical family, living the kind of life my father enjoyed as a child. I can honestly say that Jimmy and I never saw our father's disability. He supported our interests, went to our games, helped with homework, took us on family vacations, and always had time for us when we needed him.

Elmer's advocacy work grew and, in addition to

MAP meetings we traveled to attend conventions, planned major events, and saw some real change in the effort that played a role in the passage of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and eventually the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. When Governor Michael S. Dukakis was seeking a commissioner for the Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission, my father's name came up, and in 1977 he took a leave of absence from Honeywell and was appointed Commissioner, only the second state director in the country who had a disability. That two year commitment became a 30 year role as commissioner and state director of rehabilitation - a job my father loved every single day. He served under Governors Dukakis, Edward King, William Weld, Paul Cellucci, Jane Swift, Mitt Romney and Deval Patrick. In this role he was instrumental in helping tens of thousands of people with disabilities to go to work. He helped establish the personal care attendant program and was involved in ensuring assistive technology was developed and made available to people with disabilities so they could be successful in their jobs. These accomplishments were fueled by his glass-is-half-full attitude and an unmatchable optimism and enthusiastic view of life. "Get on with it" he would always say when faced with a personal, political, career or advocacy challenge. He was honored for his work in many ways including receiving four honorary doctorate degrees from Colby, Tufts, Merrimack College and Boston University.

One of his greatest joys was the birth of his granddaughter - my daughter - Jaye Mary on March 31, 1995. Both my parents were with me in the delivery room and I remember Dad had this soft, gentle smile and tears in his eyes when he held her for the first time. She smiled several weeks later while lying on his chest, and he shared his love of camp by treating her to four summers at Camp Wawenock for girls on Sebago Lake.

The saddest time in our lives was when my mother passed away in her sleep on April 26, 2007. Dad said it was only then that he realized he was a quadriplegic because my mother had simply incorporated his needs into her daily routine. He credits her with making his life and success possible. To make matters even worse, a month after my mother died, Governor Patrick, in a sweep of state directors, did not reappoint my father as commissioner - a second crushing blow. But true to my father's character, he continued to make a contribution to the world. He started a consulting business, taught a disability policy course at Assumption College as adjunct professor, continued to serve on the board of the American Red Cross and Partners HealthCare, and moved forward with two significant projects to document the disability rights movement - being part of the team to produce Lives Worth Living, a documentary that aired as part of the PBS series Independent Lens, and writing his own book, The Road Taken: The Personal and Political Life of a Disability Rights Activist.

Elmer finished his book, but I'll have to write the final chapter before it is published. It will talk about his strength of character, his perseverance, and his daily interest in helping others. I'll write about this final trip to the hospital, and how he rallied enough to talk to my brother about his truck, to tell me that actor Tom Hanks should play him in the movie version of his book, and to hear one last camp song. He remained independent and in control of his destiny, as always, until his last breath.

There will be a small funeral service with family and close friends followed by a public memorial service to be announced at a later date. In lieu of flowers, please consider supporting one of two funds established to give the life-changing experience of camp to a camper with a disability:

Mary & Elmer Bartels Campership Fund/Camp Agawam Agawam Council 6 Fundy Road, Suite 100 Falmouth, Maine 04102

Easter Seals/Bartels Campership Fund 484 Main Street Worcester, MA 01608

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