

Former residents, advocates recall BTS closing

By Bruce Edwards

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Albert J. Marro / Staff Photos

Herman Goldberg of Rutland passes around a microphone during a “fish bowl” discussion that included former Brandon Training School residents Friday at the Killington Grand Hotel. Former BTS residents were at the 20th anniversary celebration of the closing of the facility.

KILLINGTON — Twenty years ago this week, Vermont took the long-awaited action of closing its only state-run institution for people with developmental disabilities.

Friday, advocates for the developmentally challenged, along with former residents of the former Brandon Training School, celebrated the 20th anniversary of the school’s closing.

Former residents recalled nightmarish experiences of being warehoused at the school, the only institution of its kind in the state. But they also spoke of a better and productive life today as members of the community.

Douglas Racine, secretary of the Agency of Human Services, said when the state

made its commitment to integrate residents of the school back into the community it was nothing short of amazing, given the difficulties.

Racine said it took courage on the part of the “individuals at Brandon, for the families of those individuals, for the community members to welcome individuals back into the communities, welcoming everybody as an integral part of the community.”

And he said the commitment to help those with developmental disabilities remains just as strong today.

“We are committed through good times and bad times ... but the commitment for independence, the commitment to the dignity of all Vermont citizens will continue,” Racine told the gathering at the Killington Grand Hotel.

Bill Ashe, director of Upper Valley Services and a BTS employee starting in the 1970s, cautioned his audience not to forget the past, so it’s not repeated.

“I think the challenges we have in front of us today are every bit as difficult; they’re different,” Ashe said, “but every bit as difficult as the challenges that were faced when people came together and decided that we were going to change the way in which individuals with disabilities were served in Vermont by closing the institution.”

Starting in the 1980s, several governors culminating with Gov. Howard Dean worked to close the school, said Theresa Wood, former deputy commissioner of the Department of Disabilities, Aging and Independent Living.

Through the years, Wood said a total of 2,300 people came through the doors of the school. At its peak, there were 650 residents. By the time it closed on Nov. 17, 1993, the last 200 residents were integrated back into a community-based setting.

Vermont was the second state to take such action. New Hampshire was first, though advocates, including Wood, said Vermont did it the right way.

Dean sent a letter that was read at the celebration; he called the effort to integrate residents back into the community a civil rights struggle.

The celebration included former Brandon Training School residents and their recollections. One of the success stories belongs to Larry Bissonnette of Milton, now a well-known and respected artist and self-advocate.

There was a “fishbowl” session, or discussion in the round. Several former residents, with the help of a facilitator, shared in sometimes emotional terms what their life was like then and what it’s like now.

“They put me in a special room and they put me in a straitjacket,” recalled Helen Fredericks of East Barre.

“I hope it never happens to anybody, ever again,” said Fredericks, who broke down in tears.

Joe Bushey of East Barre remembered the bars on the window and a room with no heat. He said they wouldn’t let him out until he behaved.

Residents, like Ken LaFoe of South Burlington, would watch out for each other as well. “I’m your big brother,” LaFoe recalled, telling other residents.

Life has gotten better for the former residents.

“I’ve got a job at Hannaford’s,” said Paul Nichols of Burlington, who is saving money to take a vacation.

Karen Topper, director of Green Mountain Self-Advocates, who served as the discussion facilitator, asked the former residents what they would like people to

know about those with disabilities.

“Don’t call people retarded or crazy or stupid or nuts,” said Fredericks, her voice quivering. “It’s not our fault.”

bruce.edwards@rutlandherald.com