

**Attorney General Thornburgh speech at Foundation for
Developmental Disabilities Dinner, San Diego, April 20,
1989 (24:32)**

[Applause]

>> Thornburgh: Thank you, Al, for a most generous introduction. I have to tell you, it doesn't always happen that way. I was in my home state of Pennsylvania not long ago at an event where the master of ceremonies dashed to the microphone and breathlessly said to the audience, "I know you all want to hear the latest dope from Washington. So here's the Attorney General."

[Laughter]

But it is a great pleasure for me to be here this evening and join in the celebration of 20 significant years of contribution to this community and establishing standards of performance in dealing with the challenges of those with mental retardation and developmental disabilities that are inherent in your efforts. I am no stranger to the Regional Center. It was my great privilege about six years ago, I guess, Mac, to be here when I was governor of Pennsylvania to visit and learn of your activities. And when Mac extended to me the great privilege of speaking to you this evening, there was no question in my mind that we would come and join in this very splendid evening and the congratulations that are due so many of you for the job that's been done in this exemplary operation. I don't want to give you a long speech tonight. It's about a quarter to 1:00 by my clock.

[Laughter]

But I thought I might share with you some observations and experiences that I've had, personal experiences and political experiences and professional experiences that relate to the quest that we jointly engage in. These experiences, I expect, are not dissimilar to many of yours. And I think that there is a bond amongst those of us who have worked in this field that gives us not only a sense of recognition of the task that we undertake but a sense of identification with some of the difficulties and burdens that have to be overcome. At the same time, some of the joy and exhilaration that come from accomplishments such as those that have been spelled out here this evening.

My personal experiences with this field began abruptly on July 1, 1960. I was a young lawyer in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, married, with three fine young sons. My wife had driven me to work at my

law firm with the three boys. On the way home, they were involved in a serious automobile accident that took her life and injured the three boys. And while the older two recovered very quickly, the youngest, our son Peter, then just 4 months old, was seriously injured. He had head injuries and brain damage that kept him in the hospital for six months, undergoing a series of operations, and introduced me to the joys and frustrations and challenges and opportunities that come from children that are special. And as a single parent for three years, it took some coping to get into the swing of things in dealing with the three youngsters. But the Lord had mercy on me and sent me Ginny, and we were married, and since then she... Together with helping hands of the type that are much in evidence here this evening in our community, both among the professionals and the volunteers, gave us a sense of the particular treasure that this young man was to be for us and for our family.

Peter Thornburgh's 29 years old now. He lives independently in a group residence, works at a workshop, brings home a paycheck, and pays taxes. He has a degree of independence that I'm sure is not unfamiliar to any of you in this room but which certainly was not anticipated by his mother and father when he was a young man. He has, as Ginny points out many times, realized a far greater portion of his potential, limited though it may be, than I suspect any of us in this room have realized with regard to our potential. His independence makes him vulnerable. There are known risks involved with his status. But the progress that has been made by this young man I'm sure is progress replicated in the experience of each of you. And it gives you a special sense of the gift of life that grows and opportunity that is available to all of God's people on this Earth.

And I, too, now have to pay tribute to Ginny Thornburgh for what she has done, experiences again probably not dissimilar from what many of you here in this room tonight have undertaken and can appreciate. Our family has developed that special sensitivity that comes from having a special member. Our oldest son, John, I'm pleased to say, is now a board member of the ARC in his community, following in his mom's footsteps. Because beginning as a volunteer on behalf of her own son, Ginny's work has extended not only to others with developmental disabilities but in the whole field of the disabled, serving as chairman of her ARC at home, serving with Mac and Al and others of you on PCMR, being a volunteer advocate of lobbyists of the governor, when he was in office.

[Laughter]

Just recently completing an exciting tour of duty at Harvard University as the university-wide coordinator for persons with disabilities, a position that had never existed at that great institution. And now serves as a consultant to the National Organization on Disabilities in the field of disabilities and religion, breaking down some of the barriers that exist to the full enjoyment of access to religious institutions in the United States. I'm probably laboring this a little bit, but I'm very proud of the woman I love and the contributions that she's made not just in our family but in the extended family that she has come into contact with over the years. And I'm particularly proud to bask in her reflected glory tonight because I know she has lots of friends here.

[Applause]

You know, times change, and your personal challenges and opportunities as you grow into new assignments become much larger. When I was elected governor of Pennsylvania in 1979, it was, in a way, a moment of truth, because it was then up to me to deliver on those commitments that had been made during the campaign and those efforts that had been exerted by my wife and her colleagues and by me in my capacity as being involved in the administration of justice. And those commitments about maximizing the degree of normalization that were to be made available to men and women of my state, the realization of our goal, our stated goal of reducing the population in our institutions and vastly expanding opportunities for community placements came home to roost. And some of you will recall that in the late '70s and early '80s in Pennsylvania, like most states, we had a symbol of our problems -- the symbol called Pennhurst, one of the noted or notorious institutions subject to political back-and-forth, of litigation that seemed to never end. Our agenda at the beginning of this decade was dominated by controversy over Pennhurst. And I think probably one of the most satisfying moments during the eight years that I served as governor was when the last resident of Pennhurst left and that institution as such was shut down. Because as most symbols come to be, their domination of the agenda often obscures the real advances that are being made. But when they are dealt with effectively and the agenda is clear, then what has been accomplished becomes all that more evident. And I am proud of the things that we were able to do.

I don't want to flood you with tales about Pennsylvania, but I will mention two statistics that I think have particular meaning for this group, which has, from the grass roots up, built an organization and commandeered a budget and commitment that truly

is an inspiration to all of us. And those two statistics are these. In 1979, when I took office, we had 8,404 persons in our institutions. In 1987, when I left office, we had less than half of that -- 4,157. At the same time, our community residents had grown from 5,800 to 10,938. We closed new admissions to our institutions in 1979, and since then, no child under five has entered an institution in the commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Those statistics evidence almost a 180-degree turn in not only philosophy but activity within our state. And the second and perhaps obvious and related statistic was one we celebrated in the 1985-'86 fiscal year, because for the first time, our budget represented an allocation of more dollars to community facilities than it did to institutional facilities. During the eight years that I was in office, our institutional expenditures increased from \$212 million to \$242 million while our community expenditures more than tripled, going from \$115 million to \$362 million -- again evidencing the manner in which we could convert into action philosophy and the desire to maximize the opportunities for individuals to be in the community, where they can enjoy the maximum opportunity themselves to realize their potential.

There was a great deal of opposition to this change in emphasis. A lot of it came from public-employee unions for fear of layoffs and furloughs that might reduce the number of persons employed in the system. But by careful management -- retirements, attrition, job placement -- we were able to neutralize that opposition. And we had constant crying from the advocates, including that within my own family. But that crying was a spur to ensure that this governor lived up to his word. And I needn't tell this group how important that advocacy is, particularly when it's expressed as eloquently as it has been here this evening. And I think probably one of my proudest moments was when we were recognized by our statewide ARC together with Ginny and Peter as the family of the year. I think I kind of snuck in under that designation, but I was pleased and proud.

[Laughter]

Well, again, as I said, the job is never done. And I just want to observe for a moment some of the additional personal and political challenges, professional challenges. My profession is the law, and as Attorney General and operating head of our Department of Justice, I now face new responsibilities and have new opportunities to aid in the effort that we have discussed here this evening. Our civil-rights division in the Department of Justice is charged with the responsibility of serving all Americans in the observance of their civil rights and civil

liberties. It is clear that the rights of this nation, if they're to have any meaning at all, must extend to all of our citizens, to protect their well-being, promote their independence, and to allow each the opportunity to reach his or her full potential. That's the blessing of America, the blessing to be guarded, to be nurtured, and to be fought for. It is my pledge as Attorney General to do all within my power to ensure those blessings are enjoyed by persons with mental retardation and developmental disabilities and by all of our fellow citizens with special needs.

Concern, compassion, and commitment to the full enforcement of the law are what we need in this effort. Through the concern of all Americans, the compassion of those like yourselves who are involved in supporting those with disabilities, and the commitment by each of you and by your government, we will not falter in meeting that challenge. We must recognize that out-of-sight, out-of-mind practices still exist and must be remedied. We in the Department of Justice have the responsibility to deal with the act passed by the Congress in 1980 entitled The Civil Rights of Institutionalized Persons Act, known to many of you as CRIPA, a responsibility that we take seriously to deal with abuses within the system that is designed to handle and care for persons with disabilities.

But it isn't all enforcement. It isn't all the bringing of civil or criminal actions to deal with wrongdoing within the system. As the chairman of the President's Domestic Policy Council, we are beginning this month to examine in particular how to convert President Bush's commitment to reducing the barriers of discrimination and maximizing the opportunities for full participation in American life for persons with disabilities. This is a job for those concerned with justice, as well. That these opportunities and these challenges are taken very seriously by the Department of Justice.

While we've accomplished much during the period of time that this organization began, grew, and has prospered to the extent described so eloquently this evening, we must guard against thinking that we have done all that we can and should do, either at those facilities which continue to operate under our scrutiny or investigating new concerns and taking appropriate action. The task that lies before us is substantial and one that requires a maximum commitment. Securing the rights...the rights of those with mental retardation and developmental disabilities is not a situation of being the least we can do. It is a case of being what we must do as a vital first step in meeting our responsibility to those whom you know better than I were once neglected and

forgotten. A first step in meeting their needs. A first step in allowing them to realize their fullest potential. And a first step in giving them full enjoyment of our nation's rights and freedoms -- the rights of independence and self-respect, and the freedom to hope and to dream.

These hopes and dreams are sweeping across not only this nation but around the world. Last week, Ginny and I had the great pleasure of dining with the Queen of Sweden, Queen Sylvia. A lovely and charming woman, but far more than that, a woman whom we were surprised and gratified to know has made the interests of those with disabilities her efforts, and in particular has promoted around the world the development of programs of exercise and athletics for all the spectrum of persons with disabilities. It somewhat set us off, I think, because one does not expect to discover activists within the ranks of royalty. But it was a pleasant surprise and one that evidenced the truly worldwide scope of the concerns that you have expressed and served during the 20 years that this center has contributed so much to this community.

I was taken, Mac, with your reverence to the tree, which has become a symbol for this organization -- a symbol of development and growth -- expressing the philosophy that adorns your annual report evidencing 20 years of accomplishment, a philosophy that states the goal of providing, and I quote, because I don't think I could say it any better, "providing maximum opportunity to participate in everyday living experiences that permit development of the person's highest potential." That says it all. And you who have aided in this effort over the years have done it all. And we who are the visiting fireman and women this evening salute you and extend our thanks for holding high a very important light that shines far beyond the confines of your community.

We thank you for giving us the great privilege of visiting with you this evening, making new friends, and paying tribute to those of you who have made a lasting contribution to your community. Hats off to this center and to those of you who have made it happen. You done good.

[Applause]