

1950's

*Drs. Rosemary and Gunnar Dybwad (l)
Lt. Gov. Robert Murphy greets
Rex Trailer at the State House (r)*



The 50's: The Dawn of Hope

We came from nothing; now we stand for something

Our son, Donald, was placed at the Paul A. Dever School when he was only six-years-old. He cried twenty-four hours a day. We couldn't sleep. I was afraid my husband, Harry would get killed on the road. We had no place to turn, nobody to help us. We could only see him every other Sunday from 10:00 till 12:00 in the morning. Imagine being told you could only see your six-year-old twice a month. It was terrible.

Some of the local chapters were running nursery schools, but there was no funding. Everything we did was a battle. Greater Boston had begun in the forties but Arcs were happening around the state. The first time we met to form a state association was some place in Framingham. Nobody had any money. It was a struggle from day one.



Founders: l-r, Gert Lynch, John Fettinger, Eileen Cunningham, Don Guild and Maury Mezoff, Executive Director

The big issue was the Community Clinical Nursery Schools. We wanted the state to take them over. The state refused. Fine. I told them, we'll take all the kids to the State House. "You wouldn't," said Lew Klebanoff, who was head of the Bureau of Retardation. "Watch me," I said. Eventually the state took them over. "Provide vs. obtain" was a big issue. We knew we couldn't run these programs forever.

One day a young man died at the Fernald School. His mother, who had died before him, had been a friend of mine from GBARC. I felt I should go to the funeral. I called Fernald and couldn't find out anything, so I called the rabbi who was affiliated with the facility to ask where the funeral was taking place. "Funeral," he said and sort of laughed. "There's no funeral. We sold the body to Harvard for \$50.00." There was no money to bury people. When I was president, the big thing was to create a fund for indigent people.

Florence Finkel, a founding member of the Massachusetts Association for Retarded Children, 1955

From the report of the Special Commission on Mental Retardation, 1953:

"... although the community was providing for the education and training of the retarded, there was still a relatively large group of mentally retarded persons with emotional and other defects not adequately served. Their community adjustment was difficult and they required at least temporary care in an institutional setting. The Commission noted that the change of the character of the patient population by having a substantial increase of the severely and profoundly retarded under the age of five years in state schools placed new demands on patterns of staffing. In many institutions, the Commission noted ward coverages were at dangerously low levels, and it was not uncommon to find one person on night duty in a dormitory containing over 100 boys and girls."

The Arc began because it was needed. Families were isolated. People with disabilities were hidden away.

When parents were told by their doctor that their newborn had mental retardation, they were totally devastated and left without hope. Parents were given no other choice but to place their child in an institution. That was the situation facing thousands of families in Massachusetts.

Families began to come together in homes, churches and other settings to support each other. The first local chapters of The Arc (*originally the Association for Retarded Children*) began to open. Some of the early chapters in Massachusetts included the Greater Boston Chapter (*formed in 1945*), Franklin County, Hampshire County, and South Norfolk. Without public funding, families developed classrooms and camp opportunities for their children and began clinical nurseries.

1950: The National Arc opens. Massachusetts is one of 14 states represented.

1953: The Legislature creates a special unpaid commission to investigate training facilities for retarded children.

1954: The National Association for Retarded Children holds its second national convention in Boston.

1955: The Massachusetts Association for Retarded Children is formally recognized.

1957: Legislation is passed authorizing the Department of Mental Health to operate fourteen pre-school clinical nurseries.

1958: The Greater Boston Arc opens the first sheltered workshop in the Commonwealth.

1959: The 50's end with the Wagon Train, organized by Rex Trailer, host of WBZ-TV's "Boomtown," who worked with The Arc to raise awareness. Rex led sixteen vehicles in a wagon train as it journeyed for a week from Greenfield in the Pioneer Valley to the State House in Boston.