

My name is Caroly Gibson and I am grateful for the opportunity to speak to you today as a concerned, determined, yet frustrated, frightened parent.

My story is a story that's repeated all over this land... a story of children, youth, and adults falling through the cracks of our overwhelmed, overworked, and under funded systems.

It's a story of reacting to crisis rather than preparing to prevent crisis... a story of money for prisons rather than money for prevention... a story of our fellow human beings who require regular medications and constant help with the basics of living.

I want to tell you the story of Karen, my step daughter:

Karen was born in 1975..big blue eyes and a shock of red hair..Karen was a fussy baby..throughout childhood there were signs that she wasn't quite average. Maybe a good word would be "grumpy"..short-tempered, frustrated by simple tasks..

The school years revealed Karen having difficulty with learning and peer relationships. Physical signs became more evident as Karen developed..her left arm and leg were shorter than the right..sight and hearing on her left side were impaired..as well as spinal scoliosis.

The public schools labeled her "learning disabled" and placed her in the special education track where she stayed right through high school.

By the time Karen was nine, it was obvious to the medical community that Karen had had a stroke..probably in utero or during the birth process. Tests showed significant brain damage, leaving her physically, intellectually, emotionally, and psychologically impaired.

We tried to do what we could to alleviate some of the physical symptoms..glasses, hearing aid, back brace, and even lengthening the left leg to eliminate a tall lift on one shoe.

A neuro-psyche exam explained in detail Karen's multiple limitations.

Some panic set in..how could we as her family help her? What help was available and affordable?

The schools were kind to Karen, but offered no real options for the future.

I decided to explore on my own some of the programs available in our state. I began with the Dept of Mental Retardation (as it used to be called)..they were sorry, but Karen missed the IQ standards by two points. A friend told me there was help for those with brain damage through an "Acquired Brain Injury" program..An ABI waiver was needed..so I applied.

Another dead end as they explained the help was only available to those whose brain injury occurred after birth, not before birth.

I can't tell you the countless hours I spent..phone calls, letters, frustrated dead ends. We finally discovered VISTA, a program in Westbrook, CT helping those with a wide range of disabilities..they accepted Karen..she gradually moved from a kind of "dorm" setting to more independent arrangements..three roommates, one roommate..the answer seemed to be the same..difficulty with peer relationships..easily frustrated, anger issues, outbursts, low tolerance for any stress.

There isn't time here for all the details..eventually we all decided to try Karen in her own mobile home, with a cat, a part time job, and regular visiting supervision. Unfortunately, her medications were not carefully monitored, and the counseling services were not the 24-7 that Karen really needed..Karen's difficulties escalated..

She began experimenting with alcohol and cutting herself..Frequent 911 calls landed her in Middlesex Hospital several times..revealing deeper psychological issues..showing signs of borderline personality disorder.

Then the crisis! Karen started a fire in the Waters Edge Resort bathroom..then another in the Stop and Shop restroom..

She became infatuated with a young man living in the mobile home next to hers..when he did not return her affection, she burned his house down..with a technique she learned from the TV show “Cops”.

She carefully lied about any involvement. The mobile home was replaced by the neighbor, and Karen attempted to burn it down again! This time she was caught. Thank God no one was hurt or killed.

Karen was arrested and incarcerated at the York facility for a sentence of three years. VISTA quickly washed their hands of the situation..fearing any liability on their part.

Karen flourished in the prison environment..with 24-7 supervision she seemed happier and more at peace than we had ever seen her.

Now we had to “step up” our search for help..what would happen to Karen when she was released?

When she was to be released on probation, the judge made it clear..”this young woman needs 24-7 supervision, and then in obvious personal discomfort, he said that would be near impossible to find.

Our search led us to NAMI (the National Association for the Mentally Ill) which then led us to Guardian Ad Litem.. Guardian would help in locating an appropriate place for Karen upon release from prison.

Guardian has helped and continues to help us navigate the complicated state systems..That brings us to where we are at the present:

We just attended a meeting in Middletown..sitting around a large table with a host of dedicated health care professionals under the umbrella of DEMAS the Dept of Mental Health..Karen was placed in a temporary addiction program and then a temporary group home in Hartford..she has to leave this house any day now....where to go from here? With brain damage, mental illness, and a history of arson, there are no easy answers.

Wonderful creative ideas emerged from around that table..but the hands of these dedicated professionals were tied by a system of inadequate programs and insufficient funds.

Isn't it sad..that I stand here today, grateful for the fact that Karen went to prison! If it weren't for her being arrested, she would not be "in the system"..

Our Karen isn't alone..there are so many Karens..an often ignored population slipping through the cracks..dangers to themselves and dangerous to others.. It's time we take a closer look at the obstacles we place in programs with too narrow admitting criteria, and it's time to look at our financial priorities.

As a citizen of this state, and as a parent, I will continue to fight..it's a matter of basic love, basic justice, and basic humanity. Thank you.