

# The Independent Citizen



Spring 2011

## *Fighting for People with Disabilities from Outside and from Within*

Community Access Unlimited looked to Washington and within its own walls when honoring New Jersey Congressman Frank Pallone and Robert Griffin, president of CAU's board of trustees and an attorney and partner at Griffin, Griffin & Alexander, at the 30<sup>th</sup> Annual Gala Dinner Dance in October.

Pallone was honored with the Humanitarian of the Year award, which recognizes a person who has provided ongoing support and influence on behalf of people with disabilities and at-risk youth. Griffin received the Geller Award, which is presented to a person who has made a significant commitment to CAU and its members and best reflects the universal concept of volunteerism.

As a senior member of the House Energy and Commerce Committee, Pallone is instrumental in championing the interests of New Jersey and the nation in many areas, including health care. Pallone spearheaded the CLASS act, which created a voluntary insurance program to help people – including those with disabilities – finance long-term care services and support and played an instrumental role in forwarding health care reform. He also was instrumental in securing funding for affordable housing CAU constructed in Elizabeth.

"We've made a huge difference with your help," Pallone said. "We've made a difference for people with disabilities but there's more to do...I want to expand services, not cut them back. I believe in an activist government, not one that says, 'You're on your own.'"



*Rep. Frank Pallone, Humanitarian of the Year*

"Everyone on our board believes what they're doing is the most important thing in their lives.

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*Bob Griffin, standing with Sidney Blanchard, CAU Executive Director, accepts Geller Award proclamation from Freeholders Daniel Sullivan (far left) and Alex Mirabella (far right).*

Griffin has served as president of the CAU board of trustees since 2007. He began his love affair with CAU in 1989 when the agency needed legal assistance with a condominium association and quickly became a member of the board.

"I have found over time that when people do things that turn out to be important, they rarely do it alone," he said.

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## Gala ... continued from page 1

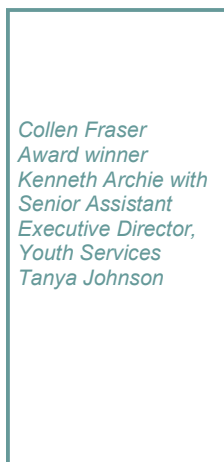
That atmosphere of commitment is infectious."

TD Bank was recognized as a key community partner of CAU. The TD Bank Foundation recently provided CAU with a \$15,000 grant for its Home Share program. "We support Community Access Unlimited because not only can you see the good that's being done on the outside, you also can see on the inside that the money is being well spent," said Martin Melilli, regional vice president Union East-Essex lending at TD Bank.

CAU also honored a number of members and partners for advocacy and ongoing support of CAU, its members and programs, including members Gregory Felzenberg and Kenneth Archie, who received Colleen Fraser Awards. Felzenberg worked to support the successful movement to remove the term retardation from New Jersey law and Archie has worked hard to advocate for at-risk youth, ensuring they receive all incentives to which they are entitled.



*Colleen Fraser  
Award Winner  
Greg Felzenberg  
with family and  
CAU staff*



*Colleen Fraser  
Award winner  
Kenneth Archie with  
Senior Assistant  
Executive Director,  
Youth Services  
Tanya Johnson*



## Board Member Profile: Deborah Mohammed-Spigner - Linking Academia and Social Policy



The mixture was just right. With an accomplished background in both academia and public service, in Deborah Mohammed-Spigner CAU has a board member ideally suited to help strengthen the agency's ties to the academic community in order to broaden its social policy outreach. Serving on CAU's Academic Linkage Committee – along with board members Karen Ensle and Tendai Ngoro – Deborah is helping CAU expand its message through this effective avenue.

"We look for ways to make linkage to the academic community," she said. "We see the academic community as being very instrumental in moving our social policy forward and bringing more exposure to the issues that impact our members." For example, the committee was instrumental in bringing renowned social epidemiologist Richard Wilkinson to a recent symposium at Kean University where he discussed the impacts of inequality in a society (see page 7).

Deborah's personal accomplishments are impressive, as well. She serves as president and CEO of Mohammed-Spigner LLC, a marketing and communications company, and is the past executive director of Common Cause New Jersey. She holds a doctorate in public administration from the School of Public Affairs and Administration at Rutgers University and is an adjunct professor at both Rutgers-Newark and Kean University.

In CAU she sees an effective model that can be replicated nationwide.

"I'd like to see Community Access continue to do the work they're doing as it relates to state policy and closing institutions that limit the opportunities of people," she said.



## From the Desk of the Executive Director

As New Jersey's 2012 budget negotiations are underway, state leaders have an opportunity to achieve significant savings simply by complying with federal law. Under the Olmstead Act, the Americans with Disabilities Act requires states to enable people with disabilities to live in community settings rather than institutions. About 2,800 New Jersey residents live in developmental centers – more than every state except Texas. In 2005 New Jersey introduced its Path to Progress plan for complying with Olmstead by 2015. To date the state has failed to make meaningful progress and now faces law suits filed on behalf of these residents.

Institutional living costs \$285,795 per individual per year, or 250 percent more than the cost of community living. The average cost for providing those same services in the community is \$113,880. In 2009, New Jersey's seven developmental centers consumed 31 percent of the \$1.4 billion budget of the Division of Developmental Disabilities while serving less than 8 percent of the population served by the department – not an efficient use of taxpayer dollars.

Freeing people from institutions and realizing these savings, however, requires planning. Without access to affordable accessible housing people will have nowhere to live and we will be forced to care for them in high cost institutional settings. Without access to adequate medical care, people will enter our health care system at the point of highest cost – emergency rooms. Without access to transportation people with disabilities who don't drive can't get to work, where they can contribute to their community and pay taxes. We must invest in systems where people can flourish the most and cost the least to truly realize their, and our, potential.

We began CAU in 1979 by successfully removing 20 people with developmental disabilities from institutional living and integrating them into the community. Today we assist more than 3,500 individuals with all kinds of disabilities each year. Community living offers people with disabilities the opportunity to live in their own homes, receiving the support they need, contributing to society – in many ways financial – and building self-esteem. Yet if that moral compulsion and compliance with federal law is not enough incentive, then state leaders should just do the math.

Best Wishes,

Sid Blanchard



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## You Can Make a Difference

You can make life extra special for a youth or adult with disabilities. **Great things come in small packages.**  
If you can donate one or more of the following items, our members would appreciate it.

\*\*Prepaid cell phones at \$80 per phone \*\*Tupperware at \$25 per set \*\*Silverware at \$10 per set \*\*Crochet and Knitting materials—\$50 worth of materials \*\*Bedding at \$60 per "Bed in a Bag" \*\*Alarm Clocks at \$10 each \*\*Lamps at \$20 each  
\*\*DVD Players at \$45 per unit \*\*Pots and Pans at \$75 per set \*\*IPODS at \$125 each \*\*I Tune cards at \$25 each

**Make a difference today!**

Donate online at [www.caunj.org](http://www.caunj.org) or

make checks payable to **Community Access Unlimited** and send to **80 West Grand Street, Elizabeth, NJ 07202**  
or drop off your donations at our main office.

**Thank you for your support!**





## CAU and Friends Take Largest Step Ever at 2010 Walk

CAU members, staff, family and friends this fall took great strides toward allowing people with disabilities to lead more fulfilling lives and at-risk youth to plan for surer tomorrows, raising a record \$30,000 at the 2010 Ira Geller Memorial Walk-A-Thon. More than 325 walkers and sponsors participated.

Again this year CAU also enjoyed the support of the members of the boys soccer, basketball and baseball teams from New Brunswick High School, who attended the event as part of their community service efforts under the Play It Smart program, a national program designed to help student-athletes take responsibility for their futures through lessons learned on the playing field, in the classroom and in service to others. The trip to the event is a valuable learning experience for the students, according to Rafael Castillo, academic counselor of Play It Smart at New Brunswick High School.

"We have a goal to raise awareness," Castillo said. "We want them to see the needs within the community. A lot of them come from economically challenged backgrounds. They see the needs but they don't know what to do about it."

At the Walk-A-Thon the students see first-hand people with disabilities who know what to do taking strides to overcome their challenges. Money raised through the walk helps CAU members take concrete steps toward improving their lives and strengthening the outlook for their futures.

"This event is so remarkable because you can watch people with disabilities and young people who have struggled through difficult early years literally take strides toward better lives and futures," said Sid Blanchard, executive director at CAU. "We only provide the supports and services. They are the ones who make the commitment and put in the effort to improve their lives."

The Walk-A-Thon also was supported by more than two dozen businesses.

"The walk offers a wonderful opportunity for our community partners to provide support that is essential to our fulfilling of mission of supporting people with special needs," Blanchard said. "The support we receive from the business community helps us turn steps into leaps of progress every year."



### Remember a Loved One or Special Occasion by Purchasing a Leaf on CAU's Tree of Life



You can personalize your message for years to come on the Tree of Life located at CAU's main office in Elizabeth.

**Cost of a Leaf: \$50**

**Purchase Your Leaf Today!**

**...Tell Someone You're Thinking of Them...**

**Consider sending a Tribute Card from CAU!**



**Tributes Can Be Purchased For:**

**1 Card for \$5  
3 Cards for \$10**

**You let us know who the tribute(s) should be sent & we will take care of the rest, or we can send you the supplies to attach your own message in each card!**

**For more information, please call 908.354.3040 x272.**



## The Power of the Pen...

*"An army of principles can penetrate where an army of soldiers cannot."*

Thomas Paine

Advocacy rests at the core of every program and service and in the heart of every member of CAU. Toward that end CAU and its members recently turned to the printed page – like founding father Thomas Paine – to advocate for the rights of people with disabilities throughout the state and nation.

In October CAU issued a press release on behalf of our members applauding "the recent signing of Rosa's Law by President Obama, officially eliminating the terms 'mental retardation' and 'mentally retarded' from federal education, health and labor laws and replacing them with the term 'intellectual disability.'" This was a cause earlier in the year championed by member Gregory Felzenberg.

The press release – which was picked up by local media – was timed to coincide with National Disabilities Employment Awareness Month and highlighted CAU member John Hargrove, who has held a long-term job at Standard Nipple Works, Inc. in Garwood, and Mark Bloom for his advocacy on behalf of people with disabilities.

In February the following letter to the editor submitted by CAU executive director Sid Blanchard ran on the *Star Ledger* op-ed page.

### *Path to Progress Leads Nowhere*

*With Gov. Christie days away from introducing New Jersey's 2012 budget, state leaders continue to overlook an opportunity to achieve significant savings simply by complying with federal law. Under the Olmstead Act, the Americans with Disabilities Act requires states to enable people with intellectual disabilities to live in community settings rather than institutions. Nearly 3,000 New Jersey residents live in developmental centers – more than every state except Texas – and in 2005 New Jersey introduced its Path to Progress for complying with Olmstead by 2015. To date the state has failed to make meaningful progress and now faces law suits filed on behalf of these residents.*

*Institutional living costs \$285,795 per individual per year, or 250 percent more than the cost of community living. The cost for providing those same services in the community is \$113,880.*

*Community living offers people with disabilities the opportunity to live in their own homes, receiving the support they need and contributing to society as workers, consumers and citizens. Yet if that moral compulsion and compliance with federal law is not enough incentive, then Gov. Christie should just do the math.*

## Mercedes Witowsky Presents at National Forum in Washington, DC



*Mercedes with Advance CLASS Executive Director Connie Garner and Barbara Edwards, Director of CMS Disabled and Elderly Health Program Groups at Kaiser Commission Briefing.*

Mercedes Witowsky, CAU's associate executive director and state representative to the American Network of Community Resources and Options (ANCOR), recently spoke as both a social and community services professional with 28 years experience at CAU and mother of a daughter with a traumatic brain injury. Mercedes spoke at a national forum on long-term supports for people with disabilities, hosted by the Kaiser Family Foundation. She joined a notable slate of panelists, including Kathleen Sebelius, secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).

The forum provided an overview of home and community-based support options for people with functional disabilities, the role of Medicaid and the expected impact of the CLASS Act (Community Living Assistance Services and Support), which is part of health care reform. The CLASS Act establishes a national, voluntary insurance program that allows working adults to purchase community living services and supports should they become functionally disabled and require long-term care, according to HHS, which is working to define benefits by October 2012.

The CLASS Act will address a major and growing problem in the United States, where 10 million Americans require long-term support services. According to Sebelius, that number will grow to 15 million by 2020, at which time one in every six Americans reaching the age of 65 will spend more than \$100,000 on long-term care. The program will provide an option to expensive and hard to find private long-term care insurance; reverse the trend of families gutting their personal finances supporting functionally disabled loved ones only to become depended on Medicaid; and ease the resultant growing burden on Medicaid. In addition, as the program will provide benefits directly to the insured, it will offer them greater flexibility in defining their own care.

Perhaps none of the experts who spoke at the forum are more qualified to address the personal impact of having a loved with disabilities one than Mercedes, whose daughter suffered a massive stroke at 16. Now 21, Mercedes' daughter – who attends school – relies heavily on Medicaid for her daily support services.

"It's a long overdue national mechanism that we can use to plan for the future," Mercedes told the audience.





## Community Treasure

By Marianne Valls

Myrta Rosa overcame many obstacles in her life. Perhaps her greatest strength lies in her self-awareness. In 1998 severe depression forced Myrta, who was born with cerebral palsy, into the Woodbridge Development Center, just two years after her parents died. She admits she needed to learn to cope with her problems and prepare to live in the community. She spent 11 years at Woodbridge and saw the center as a place where she was able to put her life back together.

Myrta became involved in community life. She saw the need for the women to have a place to choose their own clothes and created a boutique. She recognized the need for residents to cash their paychecks from employment at the sheltered workshop and helped create a bank on the premises.

In time, the staff at Woodbridge thought Myrta was ready to leave before she felt prepared to live in the community again. Her decision to leave came when she attended Partners in Policy, a course to teach people with disabilities and their families advocacy skills, sponsored by the NJ Council on Developmental Disabilities. Myrta lived within the community one weekend each month and began to feel "comfortable" among her fellow advocates.

Myrta now resides in Plainfield and works part-time for Community Access Unlimited. She not only saves the state money but contributes to the community's economic well-being. Myrta devotes herself to self-advocacy and advocacy for people with disabilities. She participates in workshops, lectured college students preparing to work with people with disabilities and is a member of the NJ Council on Developmental Disabilities. Her theme of her advocacy work is "giving each other respect."

Living is about choice and Myrta Rosa has made her choice – a choice that has enriched the whole community.



## Saying Thanks and Giving Back

As members of CAU gathered for Thanksgiving with family and friends this fall they celebrated not only their blessings but also their achievements and giving back to the community.

CAU members with disabilities were thankful for the opportunity to live independently within the community; receive training; work and be consumers; and enjoy community involvement. Youth members were thankful for the chance to reverse life trends of foster care and move closer to fulfilling futures.

John Hargrove was thankful for the opportunity to own his own home. John took classes at CAU to learn about setting goals, saving money and credit-worthiness. Famitta Durham came to CAU from the foster care system full of anger and void of trust, by her own admission.

"When I first came, nobody could tell me anything," she said. "Then I realized people were trying to help me be a better person. Now I've become independent."



For many CAU members this appreciation translates into a desire to give back, some collectively and others as individuals. Last Spring Helping Hands members donated \$1,000 to the family of fellow-member David Dimanche, who lost several relatives in the earthquake that devastated Haiti, with the money going to help members of the family on the island.



Randy Mercado is active in local advocacy and attends monthly town council meetings in his borough. He has gotten to know his councilwoman, whom he plans to invite to CAU recreation and advocacy meetings. Dennis Foster recently spent time as a volunteer at an animal hospital and felt reconnected to the community.

"It made me feel needed," he said. "Even if I'm not getting paid, people can count on me and I try my best not to disappoint them."

"When I look at how much our members have accomplished and how much they give back to the community, I recognize that not only do they have much to be thankful for, but so do the rest of us in the community," said Sid Blanchard, CAU executive director. "We should be thankful for them."



## Bank of America Makes a Deposit on the Future

Bank of America illustrated its commitment to helping build and support the communities it serves this fall with a grant of \$7,500 to CAU for use in the agency's employment services programs. Through these programs, members with disabilities train for employment in areas that match their interests and skills and have access to classes in basic math, reading and computer skills. They work either at Community Access Unlimited or outside businesses.

CAU's younger members receive training that prepares them for every aspect of employment, from skills assessment and training to interviewing, dressing for success and interaction with others in the workplace. The On Your Way to the Top program provides youth members with employment opportunities tied to occupational training during the summer months.

"For individuals with disabilities and at-risk youth, the importance of a support network cannot be overstated, especially when it comes to gaining employment and achieving greater independence," said Robert Doherty, Bank of America New Jersey market president. "By partnering with organizations like Community Access Unlimited we are helping set opportunity in motion throughout the communities we serve."

Examples of the effectiveness of CAU's employment services programs are found throughout the membership. Michele Bartolucci has been employed at the Swan Motel in Linden for 10 years and cites her counselor and job coach at CAU for teaching her how to be employed, commute to work and manage her job-related affairs.

Famitta Durham, a youth member, works as a secretary at a law firm and part-time as a substitute working with people with disabilities. She hopes to one day open her own infant care center and attributes much of her abilities to dream big to her time and training at CAU.

"People with disabilities and at-risk youth gain immeasurable benefits from employment," said Sid Blanchard, CAU executive director. "Not only do they earn income that allows them greater independence, they also benefit from camaraderie and teamwork, and the sense of self-worth that comes from employment. In addition, employment allows them to become contributing members of society – paying taxes and rent or mortgages and becoming consumers."

## All People are Created Equal – All Societies are Not

Humans are social animals and those living in highly unequal societies often suffer from a range of pathologies, or social ills, both at the bottom and the top of the societal structure. In other words, you-know-what rolls up hill, too.

That was the message of internationally renowned social epidemiologist Richard Wilkinson at a recent seminar on the impact of inequality in society hosted by CAU and Kean University. Wilkinson is co-author of "The Spirit Level: Why more equal societies almost always do better." Social epidemiology is the science of the incidence, distribution and control of social disease in a population.

Wilkinson noted that the United States is second in the world in disparity between the nation's wealthiest 20 percent and poorest 20 percent. He maintains his research indicates that more unequal societies – and more unequal states within the United States – experience higher rates of health and social problems; mental illness; drug use; infant mortality; obesity; high school drop out prevalence; teenage pregnancy; homicide; and imprisonment. Conversely, more equal societies and states experience better child health; longer life expectancy; higher educational scores; and more innovation.

"If you fail to avoid high inequality... you will have to deal with higher rates of mental illness, drug abuse and every other kind of problem," Wilkinson and co-author Kate Pickett state in their book.

CAU was the ideal host of the event, as the agency's mission is to eliminate the gap between people with disabilities and at-risk youth by transitioning them in community living where they enjoy more equal status. In addition, Wilkinson told the audience that those desiring a more equal society must communicate to government and business leaders and the public in general about the detrimental effects of inequality on a society. This also ties in with one of CAU's cornerstones, advocacy.



*Dr. Richard Wilkinson reflects on his research regarding social inequality and its ill affects on a society's health*



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**Community Access Unlimited's Mission:** *To provide community access through effective and comprehensive support services for people with disabilities and at-risk youth, giving them the opportunity to live independently and to lead normal and productive lives in the community.*

# 17<sup>th</sup> Annual Golf Classic

Thursday, May 12, 2011

Suburban Golf Club  
Union, New Jersey

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