

Earl Walden Award for Outstanding Achievement in Rural Advocacy – 2003

- Post Savannah Conference newsletter article

Helen Roth – Winner

One might say that Helen Roth's first advocacy action (way before ADAPT was in the picture) was as a small child in the Los Angeles Children's Hospital. The year was 1939 and she was one of the thousands of children around the country who has contracted polio. She recalls the reason for her "street theater" antics – hospital food! "They used to bring us a breakfast with boiled eggs so soft they were practically raw and the head nurse would not let us be pushed out on the rooftop porch until we had eaten every little bite – even if it made us sick. When I finally got so I could walk a little with braces and crutches, I would gather up the uneaten portions in a bag which I threw over the edge of a first floor balcony and we would all go out on the porch and have fun," an older, more mature Roth recalls.

Forty years later, she learned more advanced advocacy techniques from Mary Lou Breslin at the DREDF 504 training in Salt Lake City. An executive director of a community action agency in Logan, Utah at the time, that training was her first contact with an organized group of people with disabilities. "It was a real culture shock," she states. "I had been going it alone for so many years, it took me awhile to decide whether or not I wanted to identify with such rag-tag, organized disability efforts. I finally came to embrace my peers with disabilities, and fully dedicated myself to working alongside them to improve our world.

Roth considers her greatest accomplishment to be the establishment of OPTIONS for Independence in Logan, Utah. She played a significant role in writing the proposal for funding and in directing the CIL once it opened. Of equal importance to her, however, is the constant national and local push she has made for CILs to do systems change advocacy and to view themselves as a part of the national Independent Living Movement.

As to the greatest advocacy challenge facing rural America, Roth thinks it is the ability to strike a balance between confrontational and cooperative activities. To advance any issue agenda, it is necessary to appeal to residents in the community, rather than turning them to "backlash" reactions to the issue. In other words, advocacy has to be strong enough and confrontational enough to get attention but considerate enough to gain cooperation. Roth has observed that rural people refuse to be pushed or forced.

Her advice to rural colleagues? "Independent Living is just simply part of me and my life. It is exciting and has the potential for great beneficial changes in civilization as we know it – as long as people with disabilities are willing to assume or take power and control the development of those changes. Individual services are necessary and valuable to identify issues for advocacy and to engender support for CILs, but the most efficient, effective work comes from advocacy activities that improve the lives of large numbers of people all at the same time. So, just keep on keeping on," she adds.