

Thanks to Eunice Kennedy Shriver

Joe Ferullo | Aug. 14, 2009 NCR Today

My older brother has his problems -- I still get calls from my mother about something he's done to upset the people he lives with. But overall, he's happier than my parents thought he would be. And much of that is thanks to Eunice Kennedy Shriver.

My brother is brain-damaged, plagued with a host of learning and physical disabilities. When he was born 53 years ago, he came into a world that had no real place for him. It was the parents' most consuming worry when he was little = what would happen to him as he got older, as they got older? And where could they even turn to for help?

Back then, there were no networks of families, no advocacy groups. The mentally disadvantaged lived off to the side; their lives and their stories made society too uneasy.

And then Eunice Shriver stepped forward. To my family, and others like ours, she was the bravest member of her family. She spoke out about her mentally-challenged sister (something the rest of her clan at times seemed reluctant to do), and fought for her place in society. Just by doing that, she made it okay for other families to talk about this too -- and to work with each other to find solutions, to challenge the government and public schools and social services to help out.

Beyond that, Eunice Shriver started a movement -- and my brother stands as one of her beneficiaries. For the past twenty-five years, he has lived in well-kept and welcoming group homes, warm and decent places where he has gotten good care in a safe environment. Those places did not exist on the day he was born; few could even risk hoping for them.

He has counselors who help him with psychological issues; others assist him in getting work, and getting to work on time. Still others make sure he gets decent medical care. For my mother and father, a working-class couple faced with their son's future 53 years ago, none of this was imaginable.

Like most Catholic families of that era, our house had one of those china plates with a painted portrait of President Kennedy -- he was a respected figure in our home. But his sister Eunice was the Kennedy who meant the most to our lives. Today, as my brother continues along, a happier man than the world he was born into every thought he could be, Eunice Shriver's impact remains a real and daily presence.

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