

Making **a** Difference

VOLUME 23, ISSUE 3

Winter 2023

Honoring Disability Advocate & Olmstead Trailblazer Lois Curtis

*Engaging in
Advocacy*

Georgia's 2023
Legislative Session:
A Season of Change

GCDD Council Member Evan Nodvin
Lives Life on His Own Terms

Synergies Work Expands
Opportunities

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GEORGIA COUNCIL ON
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As Georgia's 2023 legislative session begins, the Georgia Council on Developmental Disabilities (GCDD) is preparing to advocate for historic investments in Medicaid waiver programs and provider rate increases to increase wages for direct support professionals (DSPs). Additional focus areas include scholarships for inclusive post secondary education (IPSE) and ending subminimum wages.

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Featuring Evan Nodvin

Evan Nodvin is a self-advocate that has served on the Georgia Council of Developmental Disabilities (GCDD) since 2013 and currently holds a position on the council's executive committee. As a person who has Down syndrome, Nodvin is determined to live his life, his way, and make his dreams come true.

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Synergies Work, a business incubator for people with disabilities, is expanding their programs to help even more new entrepreneurs. Led by Aarti Sahgal, Synergies Work is gaining global recognition for creating spaces for entrepreneurs with disabilities to succeed and be included in the ecosystem. This spring, Synergies Work will host its EDDIE Awards ceremony to recognize entrepreneurs with disabilities.

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2023-GCDD's Work Continues!

One of our time-honored beliefs at the Georgia Council on Developmental Disabilities (GCDD) is “no numbers without stories, no stories without numbers.” It’s not enough for us to present data, nor is it enough to tell great compelling stories. To make the kinds of social and policy changes GCDD is charged with, you must do both.

Since becoming Executive Director of GCDD this past fall, I’ve spent a lot of time focused on the work of the state Senate Study Committee – formally known as the Senate Study Committee on People with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities and Waiver Plan Access. The committee has held meetings in Rome, Tifton, and Atlanta, hearing testimony from hundreds of people in the disability community.

What did we hear in the testimonies? We heard testimonies from the community. Families shared that their loved ones were sent for treatment out of state then came home without any services, throwing them into crisis. People have spoken about waiting over a decade or more to receive a waiver, being denied multiple times even with high needs and formal diagnoses and struggling to go about daily life.

Below is a list of more concerns

that the community shared at the Senate Study Committee meetings:

“Families are absolutely swamped, they need help.”

“I live in a group home. I have worked hard to learn skills to live on my own. I can’t find a place that I can afford the rent for a one-bedroom apartment.”

“Caregivers are overworked, underpaid, and cutting corners.”

“We have probably at least one family a week come say my child is finishing high school. How do we get services? They think they’re just going to go get a waiver. It’s going to be a year or 5 or 10 years.”

“People with disabilities want to live a normal life just like you.”

That last one was spoken by a self-advocate who went into her first institution when she was five years old and moved out of Central State Hospital in 2007.

It’s time to invest in this community. We need to remember developmental disability services are not only critical human services. They are invaluable tools for economic development in Georgia. People with disabilities can contribute to their communities and build careers when they have proper support.

GCDD VIEWPOINT



D'Arcy Robb

When their loved ones with intellectual and developmental disabilities have support, parents and family members can continue working and advance in their own employment. When our providers can pay employees a livable wage, they can add jobs, retain employees, and those employees put their money back to the local economy.

The disability community in Georgia faces many challenges today, but the momentum we’re building gives me great hope that together, things will change for the better. A way that you can help to make change is to participate in GCDD’s Advocacy Days, an opportunity for the community to connect with and share their concerns with Georgia state legislatures. For more information about Advocacy Days, [click here](#).

D'Arcy Robb

D'Arcy Robb

Executive Director



Georgia's 2023 Legislative Session: A Season of Change What to Expect Under the Gold Dome

By Alyssa Miller

Georgia's 2023 legislative session is set to be one of historic change as many of the top leadership positions at the Georgia State Capitol will now have new representation for the first time in many years. Governor Brian Kemp won his reelection, but we will have a new Lieutenant Governor, a new Speaker of the House, a new Senate President Pro Tempore, and many others. The upcoming session will also be the first year of the biennial, which means that we will have a group of newly elected legislators who may not have served in the past. These changes will likely also mean changes to committee assignments and committee chairs. The Georgia Council on Developmental Disabilities (GCDD) will be working to form relationships with the legislators assuming these new roles, and we will look to advocates to continue to build upon their relationships with their

elected officials. Given this is the first year of a new biennial, we can also expect to see a long list of new policy priority areas, particularly as so many of the leadership positions have changed. GCDD will continue to work throughout the session to update advocates on the latest happenings so that the community is informed.

One thing we can always count on as a focus of session is the state's budget, and we do not anticipate this year being any different as there is an over \$6 billion surplus that legislators will have to decide how to spend. As a reminder, the budget process is an almost year-long process, starting in the summer when the governor provides guidelines to state agencies on how to compile their budget. This past summer, state agencies were again told to put together a flat budget (meaning no extra money based on last

year's budget).

Every September, state agencies submit their budget proposals to the Office of Planning and Budget (OPB), and between September through January, the Governor, with support from OPB, creates his official budget recommendations. The recommendations must be sent to the General Assembly within five days of the session starting. Both House and Senate budget subcommittees review key state agency budgets and make adjustments. Key state agencies' budgets that we often advocate around, such as the Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities (DBHDD) and Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation Agency (GVRA), are located in the [House Human Resources Subcommittee](#) and the [Senate Human Development and Public Health Subcommittee](#).

GCDD's 2023 Policy Priorities

As we look forward to Georgia's 2023 session, we are also looking back and remembering the powerful legacy self-advocate Lois Curtis has left behind. As many of you are aware, Lois Curtis recently passed away after a tremendous life in which she insisted on a better life during a time that seemed impossible for people with disabilities, and in doing so, she changed the world. We encourage you to take the time to read more about her legacy on page 12. Although there has been significant progress in ensuring people with disabilities are able to live included lives in their communities, we know there is much work to do. Curtis taught us all that everyone has the right to live in their own home, in a community that loves them, and we will continue working to make that a reality here in Georgia.

A key component of community living is a robust system of home and

community-based services (HCBS). Georgia's HCBS are provided through a waiver system which provides people with intellectual and developmental disabilities medically necessary services and supports while residing in their communities, not in institutions or nursing homes. In Georgia, there are too many people with disabilities waiting to receive the necessary services to live meaningful lives in their communities of choice. Over the last decade, there has consistently been between 6,000 to 8,500 Georgians waiting for NOW/COMP waivers, and we continue to have a waiting list for the NOW/COMP HCBS waivers that is over 7,000 people long today, leaving many to wait years before receiving services they desperately need.

In addition, Georgia has not invested the funds necessary to pay Direct Support Professionals (DSPs) livable wages, resulting in a workforce shortage and crisis. DSPs are staff who provide a wide range of support

services to people with intellectual and developmental disabilities and are critical in assisting Georgians with disabilities with their activities of daily living so they can live, work, and lead self-directed lives in their communities. Although their work is incredibly valuable, without DSPs Georgians with disabilities' lives are significantly disrupted. DSPs are currently only paid approximately \$10.30 per hour in Georgia. Given the need to significantly enhance Georgia's HCBS system, GCDD's top priorities during the 2023 legislative session will be working to secure historic investments in the waiver program, as well as provider rate increases so that DSP wages can be increased. We are referring to this effort as "Waivers and Wages."

Waivers

During the 2022 session, we were encouraged to see approximately \$10 million in state funding appropriated for 513 new waivers, the most waivers funded in a single session in over a

decade; however, 513 slots make a small dent in the over 7,000 person waiting list. Since the 2022 session, we've heard countless stories shared by advocates during the Senate Study Committee on People with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities and Waiver Plan Access that have highlighted the need for those on the waiting list to receive services. Many families who currently receive waivers also testified to the need because they have lived experience of how life changing receiving a waiver can be. We will be advocating for a significant investment in new waivers this year, a first step in a multi-year strategy to fully fund the waiting list while also ensuring the current service system is strong enough to support the influx of people

coming into services. To catch up on all that has happened during the Senate Study Committee this fall, click [here](#).

Wages

Direct Support Professional (DSP) wages were also a focus of the 2022 session, with legislators funding a 2 percent provider rate increase to try and help increase DSP pay. It is important to note that DSP wages are tied to provider rates, which is why funds are directed toward increasing provider rates. The DSP crisis has also been a focus of the Senate Study Committee mentioned above, and the issues were extensively studied during Georgia's [2018 House Study Committee on the Workforce Shortage and Crisis in Home and Community Based Settings](#), as well as in GCDD's 2019 white paper "[The Direct Support Professional Workforce Crisis: Challenges, State Approaches, and Opportunities for Georgia](#)," written by Dr. Carol Britton Laws. Based on the information already known to us, we believe that the state should invest more resources to increase provider rates with a direct passthrough for

an increase in DSP wages. We are advocating for an increase in funding to guarantee a minimum wage of \$15 per hour for all DSPs.

Additional Advocacy Priorities

In addition to our primary focus of "Waivers and Wages" during the 2023 session, GCDD will also be championing additional funding for student scholarships to inclusive post secondary education (IPSE) programs and an end to subminimum wage practices. Currently, students with intellectual and developmental disabilities do not have a state-funded scholarship pathway, unlike their peers, and we plan to advocate during the 2023 session for the creation of a state-funded IPSE scholarship program. Regarding the end to subminimum wage practices, Georgians with intellectual and developmental disabilities are able to be paid below minimum wage through a special program known as 14(c), and GCDD plans to work with legislators to determine a pathway to transition Georgia businesses away from this



Photo by Claritas Creative

Five Steps to Getting Involved

1) Identify your state legislators, including your state senator and state house representative, by visiting openstates.org and typing in your home address. This year, it is important for everyone to check this out, even if you knew your legislators in the past, because we had elections for all legislators and districts may have changed after the redistricting process.

2) Once you have identified your legislators, reach out to them, either by phone or email, to let them know that you are their constituent, and you are most interested in how they can support Georgians with IDD and their families. You can find their contact information at openstates.org as well.

3) Sign up for GCDD's email list so that you can stay up to date on all the happenings during the 2023 session. You can sign up [here](#).

4) Register and join us for our hybrid advocacy days where we will be focusing on the policy priorities mentioned above. You can find out more information and register [here](#).

5) Lastly, make sure to tune in to our Public Policy for the People calls, hosted each Friday at noon starting January 20, 2023, by our Legislative Advocacy Director, Charlie Miller. [You can register for the calls here.](#)

practice. Georgians with intellectual and developmental disabilities deserve real jobs for real wages, which is why GCDD will work to ensure Georgia has the tools to be successful in their employment first journey.

Disability in ALL Policy Continues

As always, GCDD's policy vision continues to be "Disability in ALL policy," which is meant to ensure that people with intellectual and developmental disabilities and their families are considered in all areas of legislation. Over the past three sessions, since "Disability in ALL policy" was created, GCDD has worked to include the considerations of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities and their families in legislation ranged from mental health to voting rights to education. As a result, the voices of the disability community continue to be represented in new areas of policy, and we will continue to strive towards this vision as we focus on the priority areas mentioned above.



GCDD Council Member Evan Nodvin Lives Life on His Own Terms

By Hilary Vece Featuring Evan Nodvin

Evan Nodvin is 43, he lives in an apartment in Atlanta, works at Canterbury Court retirement community in Buckhead, and loves to watch University of Georgia sports. "Go Dawgs!" Nodvin, who has Down syndrome, was born and raised in Atlanta, graduating in 2000 from Chamblee High School. "When I graduated in 2000, I started working at the Marcus Jewish Community Center of Atlanta. I worked there for 20 years. I worked in the gym and at the front desk."

He was furloughed from the Marcus Center during COVID. In his current job at Canterbury Court, Nodvin works in the kitchens and dining rooms.

Nodvin, a percussionist, began playing drums in marching band in school. He still enjoys playing drums. "I have a snare drum and top hat at my mom's house." Marching band is also where he first met his girlfriend when they were 13. They went to senior prom together.

"People with Down syndrome are special. I'm just like everybody else," said Nodvin. "I just need more help. Andrew supports me as a job coach and caregiver and takes me to activities. My family supports me too. They're always here for me, but I also take care of myself on my own. I'm very independent. I can walk to my parent's house from my apartment alone."



Nodvin has a very busy schedule where he spends time with friends and family, takes classes, and is involved in other activities. "And I like to spend time with my girlfriend." He takes classes on Judaism and works out with a personal trainer. Nodvin was a competitive power lifter and competed in the Special Olympics. He also takes acting classes with Jerry's Habima Theatre, an inclusive theater featuring actors with disabilities, and is preparing to audition for Cinderella. "I love my family very much and my girlfriend too. I am passionate about my friends and community and being independent in the community. I see my parents on Fridays and stay with them on the weekends."



Nodvin is also active in advocacy. Since 2013, he has served as a Council Member for the Georgia Council on Developmental Disabilities (GCDD). He travels the state to meet with advocates and speaks at events. He met Governor Nathan Deal at an event before the pandemic.

“Advocacy runs in my family,” said Nodvin. “My favorite thing about advocacy is talking to people, giving speeches, and going to the state capitol.”

Nodvin got involved in advocacy with his parents and three older sisters when he was young.

Nodvin’s mother was inspired to get involved in advocacy when he was born. Doctors told her that he would not live past 12 years old and suggested they place him in an institution. His parents said no, and he was raised at home.

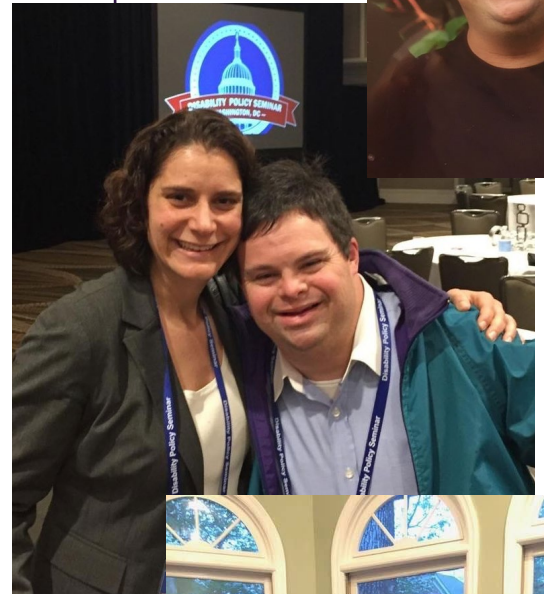
She became a parent advocate and got involved as an advocate in several policy and community groups. One of his sisters is a disability advocacy attorney and another is a special

education teacher.

Speaking in 2019 to the West Virginia Partners in Policymaking, Nodvin said “My parents and family are happy to see me living my dreams. They tell me that these are their dreams, too. They have worked very hard to make things happen for me and others by volunteering, advocating, and working for people with disabilities.”

Nodvin looks forward to continuing to live an independent life. He is a recipient of a Medicaid waiver—something more than 7000 Georgians are waiting for—that allows him to receive support in his community.

Nodvin said in 2019, “I know it is important for all of us to tell our stories to those who make the laws. Our future can be bright—for all people to equally live, work, and play in their communities.”





Advocates Prepare for the 2023 Legislative Session

Hello Advocates,

By Charlie Miller

The Georgia General Assembly is preparing for another legislative session coming up in January. The Georgia Legislative session will start the second Tuesday of January and go until early or mid-April. During Georgia's Legislative session, the state House and Senate will come together to discuss issues impacting Georgians.

One of the most important things they will be covering is the state budget. The state budget helps fund Georgia's programs and projects throughout the state. They will also be deciding how to move forward with Georgia's waiver programs like NOW/COMP. Currently, we have a waiting list of over 7,000 people who are waiting for waiver services. This means we have an excellent opportunity to advocate around this issue. The Georgia Senate passed a Senate resolution to have a study committee meet across the state of Georgia to hear the impact of how important these services are to the community.

Before the start of the legislative session, it is a great time to reach out to your state representatives to make sure they understand disability issues and why they are important to you. When you reach out to your State Senator or House member, remember that our state legislators are not going to be knowledgeable on every issue. We can educate them. Sometimes it is helpful to have a quick elevator speech ready. A good way to think of having a great elevator speech is to keep it short and simple.

The elevator speech will help you confidently talk to your legislators. When you are reaching out, make sure you tell them that you are a constituent and a voter in

their district and that you would like to talk to them about disability issues.

When you connect with a legislator whether it be by email, phone call, or meeting, make sure the legislator knows the best way to contact you if they have questions. If your legislator ever reaches out and you don't know the answer to their question, it is more than okay to tell them you do not have the answer, but you will get back to them. You can always use the Georgia Council on Developmental Disabilities (GCDD) as a resource.

For more advocacy opportunities, mark your calendars for GCDD's upcoming Advocacy Days beginning in January. This year, Advocacy Days will be a hybrid event to make sure more people are able to participate. There are two advocacy days each month, the first day being a virtual meeting with an opportunity to learn how to advocate at the capital. The second day, we will go to the capital to advocate.

This year we are advocating about Inclusive Post Secondary Education (IPSE) on January 24 and 25. February 15 and 16, we will focus on NOW/COMP waivers and Direct Support Professionals (DSPs). Finally on March 7 and 8, the topic will be Employment First/Ending Subminimum wage. To register for our Advocacy Days, [click here](#).

If you do not know who your representative is, you can always look up your legislators at openstates.org. For more information, visit www.gcdd.org.

Georgia's Leadership Education in Neurodevelopmental Disabilities

By Hilary Vece

Featuring Mark Crenshaw

Mark Crenshaw is the Assistant Director of the Center for Leadership in Disability (CLD) at Georgia State University and the Training Director for Georgia's Leadership Education in Neurodevelopmental Disabilities (GaLEND) program.

The LEND program was originally established 50 years ago by the Maternal and Child Health Bureau, and there are 60 LEND programs with a program in nearly every state and territory. The LEND programs are funded in five-year cycles through a highly competitive application process, and GaLEND is funded through 2026. The GaLEND program began in 2011, and there are 230 alumni in Georgia. This year's cohort has 27 participants.

There is no cost to participants—called fellows and trainees—and most participants receive a stipend. Participants include students in master's or doctoral programs, post-doctoral fellows, and graduates with Ph.D. or MD degrees. Additionally, the GaLEND program includes professionals in the field, advocates, and self-advocates.

GaLEND was uniquely committed from the start of their program that people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) are represented as participants. Beginning next year, all LEND programs throughout the country will be required to have IDD trainees as well.

"There are 14 different disciplines that LEND could potentially bring together, and the idea is that the next generation of professionals will work together across disciplines to get better outcomes for people with disabilities and their families," said Crenshaw.

All trainees and fellows participate in three graduate-level courses, and instruction is a mix of typical classroom instruction, case-based learning, and opportunities for participants to have conversations. Additionally, each participant is assigned to a family with a child with a disability. Participants spend eight hours with their family in the home or in the community. This is critical to helping LEND fellows and trainees understand the needs of families, providing families the opportunity to share what they want

professionals to know about providing care. Participants also learn from self-advocates who are on leadership trajectories. LEND participants complete community-based research projects in interdisciplinary groups.



Crenshaw reflected on the impact of the GaLEND program, recalling alumni thriving in clinical and policy fields. "We need to make sure that professionals in this space are receiving the training to be competent and confident to support children and adults with disabilities and their families," said Crenshaw.

Crenshaw hopes legislators understand the importance of addressing the ongoing workforce issues, like workforce shortages, low compensation, and the need for adequate and interdisciplinary training. "What we want to do is partner with policymakers to create conversations and provide additional resources around training a workforce to meet the needs of children and adults with disabilities and their families," said Crenshaw.

For more information about the GaLEND program, visit <https://cld.gsu.edu/lend/>.

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THE LEND PROGRAM

"This program allows us to educate the next generation of leaders who will support Georgia's citizens with disabilities in living more productive, fuller lives."

- Daniel Crimmins, Professor of Public Health and Founder of CLD

Remembering Lois Curtis

By
Hilary
Vece

Friends and Advocates Reflect on Life with Lois and the Doors She Opened

Olmstead v. L.C. is the Supreme Court case that provided what is now known as the Olmstead decision. In 1999, Lois Curtis—the L.C. in Olmstead v. L.C.—and Elaine Wilson, two women with disabilities living in Georgia institutions, successfully argued in the Supreme Court that housing people with disabilities in segregated settings who are capable of living in the community constitutes discrimination under the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Curtis, who was diagnosed with both an intellectual disability and mental illness at a young age, passed away on November 3, 2022, from pancreatic cancer. She was 55. She spent nearly half her life living in institutions. She was a well-known artist. Throughout her life and her involvement in advocacy, Curtis' life impacted many, and her fight to live her life freely in the community changed the lives for hundreds of thousands of people with disabilities throughout the country.

Susan Walker Goico, Director of the Disability Integration Project at the Atlanta Legal Aid Society, knew Curtis through Atlanta Legal Aid Society's work to support Lois. She reflected, "When Lois met Atlanta Legal Aid lawyer, Sue Jamieson, at Georgia Regional Hospital, she made a clear request: 'Get me out of here.' At that time, neither Lois

nor Sue knew that together (along with Elaine Wilson, the other plaintiff in the Olmstead case) they would change the landscape of disability law in this country."

Talley Wells, now the Executive Director at the North Carolina Council on Developmental Disabilities (NCCDD), advocated for Curtis during her time as Director of the Disability Integration Project at Atlanta Legal Aid Society. "At the 15th anniversary of Olmstead at the Carter Center, we gave Lois an opportunity to speak, but more importantly we gave her a space and an opportunity to do her art. Too often, we ask people to use words to explain the impact of the Olmstead decision. It is the Brown v. Board of Education for people with disabilities.





“Lois didn’t forget about people who were still stuck in institutions after she got out. She showed up at every Long Road Home event at the Georgia Capitol to raise awareness and to advocate for freedom.”

It is about the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. And it is about ending segregation and discrimination of people with disabilities,” said Wells. “But mostly it is about ensuring that every person with a disability has the right and necessary support to fully live in the community. For Lois, living meant the right to smoke her cigarettes, do her art and get paid for it, and live in her own home surrounded by her community. That day, on the 15th anniversary, we had a lot of great speakers, but nothing spoke more eloquently of the meaning of Olmstead than what Lois drew as her art that day.”

Cheri Mitchell, an advocate with the Georgia Advocacy Office (GAO), remembered Curtis’ dedication to the people who were still stuck in institutions after she got out.

“Lois didn’t forget about people who were still stuck in institutions after she got out. She showed up at every Long Road Home event at the Georgia Capitol to raise awareness and to advocate for freedom,” Mitchell said. “When asked what she would say to people in

institutions, she would say: ‘Hello to all the people living in institutions, I remember you. Give me a prayer. Sometimes I feel good about my life. When I feel bad about my life I name my country, sing the gospel, and bring my mind back home. I will sing with you again. Have a beautiful day.’”

Gillian Grable, a Community Outreach Coordinator at the Institute on Human Development and Disability (IHDD) at the University of Georgia, first met Curtis when she was a teenager living in an institution. Grable was dedicated to making Curtis’ dreams of freedom her reality. She shared a poem she wrote about Lois’ fight to be heard.

“It is 2:00 A.M. I wake with a voice that demands to be heard,” writes Grable.

“In 1994. We are sitting in a Chinese





restaurant with a group of people we have gathered for Lois' futures planning. After we read the menu, Lois orders shrimp chow mein. A member of the group says, 'I didn't know she liked shrimp.' I respond, 'Lois never had the chance to order shrimp before today.'"

Grable's reflection continues as she looks toward the future and all the other people fighting to have their voices heard too.

"Lois' birthday is the same day as Bastille Day. A national holiday in France, this date commemorates the fall of the Bastille, a prison in Paris, 210 years ago.

Since Lois was thirteen years old, she has lived over half of her life in places segregated by disability. We were led all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court by Lois' insistent voice that she be heard. It is now 4:00 A.M. Who is listening to all the other voices?"

Lois Curtis' legacy is an inspiration and a rallying cry as advocates continue to fight for the rights of all people with disabilities to live their lives freely on their own terms. Her life, her art, and what she stood for will never be forgotten.



Photos by ZUMA Press Inc. Alamy Stock Photo



Nine Georgian Authors Participated in the GCDD Storytelling Project



Christopher Fleming

• Tyrone •



Joshua Williams

• Statesboro •



Derek Heard

• Albany •



Tina Wheeler

• Macon •



Kristian Thomas

• Barnesville •



Jessica Winowich

• Columbus •



Kyleigh Kranlich

• Lawrenceville •



Ronald Bovell

• Stockbridge •



Wesley Ford

• Jackson •

Cow Tipping Press Joins GCDD's Storytelling Project

By Maria Pinkelton

What began in 2018 as an opportunity for Georgians with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) to share stories with their legislators has become a robust collection of photographs, written stories, audio conversations, and films displaying the diverse array of experiences that create the lives of these individuals. L'Arche Atlanta, StoryMuse, and their partners have traveled the state of Georgia collecting images and stories of Georgians with intellectual and developmental disabilities and the lives they live. So far, more than 150 stories have been told through the two seasons of the Hidden Voices podcast, the documentary 6,000 Waiting, two collections of Treasure Maps Roadshow short films and both short- and long-form written stories with accompanying photographs. Throughout the project, L'Arche Atlanta has partnered with organizations and people throughout the state and across the country to make the project come to life.

On December 7, 2022, Cow Tipping Press, writers from across Georgia, L'Arche Atlanta, StoryMuse, and the Georgia Council on Developmental Disabilities (GCDD) Storytelling Project team went on Facebook Live to celebrate the launch of their book, "Green Pasture Nightmare." The book, the latest work done as a part of the Storytelling Project, is an anthology of poetry and short stories, both fiction and nonfiction, penned by ten Georgians with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Cow Tipping Press, a Minnesota-based inclusive writing center/publishing company, leads workshops that create opportunities to relish the assets, rather than the deficits, of people with disabilities through the unique lens of creative writing. They seek to change

the narrative on developmental disability. The organization offers writing classes for adults with developmental disabilities (over 400 alums and counting) and creates platforms for them to speak for themselves in spaces that have historically been used to speak about them. Cow Tipping workshop instructors use differentiated instruction methods that are accessible to diverse learners and, over the course of the two-month long story development curriculum, expose the students to new writing topics and genres. Through an application process, nine budding authors from across Georgia were selected to participate in the workshops to build their creative writing talents and craft their ideas and experiences into a series of authentic stories and poetry. For many participants in the program, this is the first time they have ever had their work published.

Rachel Liberman, Cow Tipping Press Program Manager stated, "Kudos to GCDD for their work to include more than a 'single story', or the important but expected stories directly on disability in their storytelling project. As author Chimamanda Ngoze Adichie famously said, 'to create a single story, show a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become.' We at Cow Tipping believe creative storytelling—fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and journalism—from the perspective of authors with intellectual/developmental disabilities is just as important for self-advocacy as stories of challenges faced in medical, educational, and social services settings, and we're excited to be included in this important project."

As a part of the Facebook Live event, several authors shared their scripts, poetry, and short stories that were humorous,

suspenseful, and soul stirring. While the level of previous writing experience varied among the participants, it was obvious that the authors embraced the process in ways that best suited their individual talents, perspectives, and voices.

GCDD's Storytelling Project contract manager Maria Pinkelton commented, "Cow Tipping Press has served as a wonderful launch pad for these writers. The confidence that comes from participating in the creative process is powerful, and I hope it's an activity that they use often. It was a wonderful launch pad for these writers. It's been proven that the process of writing lowers stress, increases one's ability to communicate complex concepts more effectively and builds persuasive communication skills. During the book launch event, we also saw the confidence that this practice builds in those who 'flex' their creative muscles. I am pleased that this group of advocates had the opportunity to participate in this project and hope they build on the skills they've learned."

For those who were unable to attend the event, a recording is available on the [Cow Tipping Press Facebook page](#).

You can find out more about Cow Tipping Press, as well as purchase Green Pastures Nightmare and other books by previous classes on their website at <https://cowntippingpress.org>.

The entire collection of works created as part of the GCDD Storytelling Project can be found on our Telling Our Stories website at <https://story-collection.gcdd.org/the-gcdd-storytelling-project>.



Developing the Next Generation of Advocate Leaders with Project SETA

By Hilary Vece



Project SETA (Students Enhancing Their Advocacy) is preparing the next generation of leaders with developmental disabilities through the New Leaders grant from the Georgia Council on Developmental Disabilities (GCDD). Project SETA is a leadership development program for current inclusive post secondary education (IPSE) students to learn about advocacy and professionalism. The project launched in 2022 with its first cohort of 11 ambassadors with representation from each of the nine Georgia IPSE programs.

“When writing the grant proposal for Project SETA, we wanted to make sure we represented the whole state of Georgia,” said Molly Tucker, Training and Advocacy Manager and Project SETA director at the Center for Leadership and Disability (CLD) at Georgia State University.

Project SETA is a one-year program that provides a chance for students throughout the state of Georgia to come together as a cohort and build skills together. The program is a hybrid program to be as accessible as possible with ambassadors from across the state. The program includes individual goal-setting sessions at the start of the year to understand the goals of each ambassador, providing the opportunity for Project SETA to present content the students want to learn. The cohort

meets together virtually monthly. To provide individualized support, they are split in two groups that meet twice monthly for mentoring sessions. The ambassadors also meet for one-on-one sessions each month to ensure they are receiving the support, and learning the skills, that they need to reach their goals as advocacy and community leaders.

The cohort met in July 2022 for its in-person networking session where the ambassadors learned about elevator speeches and networking. State representatives, including Senator Kim Jackson, also attended the event. “What became evident at the in-person networking session is how aware young people are of what’s going on around them, and that legislators need to remember that this is the next generation and youngest generation of voters,” said Tucker.

At the end of the program, ambassadors will take what they have learned and redeliver it to students at their IPSE programs. With this redelivery of knowledge, all IPSE students in Georgia are benefiting from Project SETA.

“Project SETA is an avenue, in addition to IPSE programs, for students to figure out what they want to advocate for within their community as well as help them to learn about how to be an

advocate and how to get involved in their community,” said Darien Todd, Community Advocate Specialist and Project SETA Mentor at the Center for Leadership and Disability at Georgia State University.

The idea behind Project SETA was to build a coalition of advocate leaders in Georgia. While programs already exist to prepare people with disabilities to become advocacy leaders, the participants tend to be a bit older. “If we’re trying to find our next generation of leaders, we need to look at the next generation,” said Tucker. “Since IPSE students have already demonstrated an interest in professional development, they were an easy group to engage.”

“We’ve been very intentional that all of the skills ambassadors are learning in Project SETA are not only helpful for them to become advocates or community leaders, but will also add to their job readiness,” said Tucker. “This program is a chance for ambassadors to become more effective communicators and have space to grow into their professional identities.”

“We want to make sure that we are educating the younger generation of advocates, activists, and leaders,” said Todd. “These types of programs help people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) figure out what they want to do to help their community. They help to uplift their voices and show them that their voice matters.”

“We are empowering ambassadors to ask questions, take risks, and change the world,” said Todd.

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COVID-19 Update

By Hilary Vece

Since the start of the pandemic, COVID-19 has claimed the lives of more than 41,000 Georgians. While many have largely returned to pre-pandemic activities, it is important to remember that there are still thousands of new cases in Georgia every day. Vulnerable populations, including people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, have a higher risk of severe illness, hospitalization, and death from COVID-19.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have released several interactive tools to help you better understand the COVID-19 risks in your local community, learn when you are [eligible for boosters](#), and [when you should isolate](#) if you have tested positive or been exposed to COVID-19.

The [COVID-19 Community Level tool](#) allows you to look at your specific county's COVID-19 community level. Measured in low, medium, or high, COVID-19 community levels are based on weekly total of new cases, new hospital admissions, and the percent of inpatient beds occupied by COVID-19 patients. Recommendations based on your county's COVID-19 community level can help you know what to do when there is a higher risk of contracting the virus.

When the COVID-19 community level is low, you should avoid contact with people who have suspected or confirmed COVID-19 and isolate from

others if you have been exposed or test positive. When the COVID-19 community level is medium, in addition to avoiding contact with people who have COVID-19 and isolating from others if you test positive, if you have a higher risk of becoming ill or are in frequent contact with a high-risk individual, consider wearing a high-quality mask or respirator when indoors in public or when socializing.

When the COVID-19 community level is high, high-quality masks or respirators are recommended at all times. If you have a higher risk of becoming ill or are in frequent contact with a high-risk individual, consider avoiding non-essential indoor activities in public. Frequent self-testing before coming in contact with a high-risk individual can help to avoid passing the virus. When the community level is high, continue to avoid contact with people who have tested positive and isolate yourself if you test positive.

As always, stay up to date with COVID-19 vaccines and all recommended boosters, including the updated bivalent booster. Find a vaccine near you at [vaccines.gov](#). Anyone ages six months and older are eligible to receive a COVID-19 vaccine, and boosters are available for those ages five and older. You can [use this tool](#) to know when you should get your next vaccine dose or booster.

Remember, people may be over COVID, but COVID is not over!

Synergies Work Expands Opportunities to Encourage Representation in Entrepreneurship

By Hilary Vece

Synergies Work,

a business incubator for people with disabilities, is expanding its offerings to help even more new entrepreneurs start their businesses. Synergies Work was founded by Aarti Sahgal, a parent of a young adult with Down Syndrome.

"The last few months have been transformational," said Sahgal. First known for its i2i (Idea to Incubation) Program, Synergies Work's mission is to inspire people with disabilities to discover their talents and turn them into sustainable businesses.

Synergies Work believes in raising the bar for individuals with disabilities by challenging the soft bigotry of low expectations. The Synergies Work i2i (Idea to Incubation) Program is the only entrepreneurial program in the United States offering mentorship, business education, funding, and ongoing support to enable individuals with disabilities to launch and grow sustainable businesses. Participants who complete the i2i Incubator Program are also eligible to apply for an Impact Grant of \$500-\$2000, aimed at helping them to launch or grow their business. Successful applicants receive funding based on their business plan and proposed use of the grant

funds. This successful model has led to even more opportunities for the organization to expand its programs.

Synergies Work's business model was awarded \$225,000 in grants from Truist Foundation Inspire Awards Challenge. The Inspire Awards is a partnership with the Solve initiative at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). The Truist Foundation's Inspire Awards Challenge is a competition for non-profit organizations across the country to present the innovative solutions to the complex challenges facing small businesses led by women and BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) in their communities.

Sahgal entered the competition recognizing the intersection of women, BIPOC, and people with disabilities. Out of 127 applicants, Synergies Work won the second-place award of \$150,000 and the Audience Favorite award of \$75,000. "Winning the Audience Favorite award was a really exciting piece for me," said Sahgal.

Over the past five months, Synergies Work worked closely with MIT Solve's team, who provided supports to prepare for the competition. Including a 3-minute

film that was produced. Synergies Work presented their business model first virtually then again in person. "It was a lot of work but extremely exciting and a very fulfilling experience," said Sahgal.

Synergies Work is also part of a global collective of nine business accelerators that have been invited to the Clinton Global Summit in July. Supported by SmartJob and Enable Ventures, Synergies Work has committed to support 220 tech startups in 2023. "It's an exciting time. Finally, when we are talking about diversity and inclusion, we're also talking about entrepreneurs with disabilities," said Sahgal.

Currently there is no policy in the state of Georgia for entrepreneurship for people with disabilities. "It is critical we are in sync with the times. When we are talking about career choices for people with disabilities, we need to provide full menu of choices, including entrepreneurship," said Sahgal.

"Georgia prides itself as the second-largest tech hub, actively inviting businesses to the state, and yet when it comes to inclusion, we are not including entrepreneurs with disabilities in the conversation," said Sahgal.

There are an estimated 7.3 million entrepreneurs with disabilities from all walks of life.

Sahgal recognizes that this conversation is important not just in the community but in policy as well. "We need to talk about funding and creating spaces for entrepreneurs so that they are fully included in the ecosystem," said Sahgal.

Synergies Work also launched its new learning hub. Through its i2i Program, Synergies Work realized there are many entrepreneurs at the pre-incubation phase or entrepreneurs in need of resources that Synergies Work was not providing. The goal of the learning hub is to be a one-stop space to meet all of the needs and answer all of the questions for new entrepreneurs. This learning hub provides free resources, including articles and videos, and a community where people can ask questions from business leaders.

The learning hub is not a collection of articles pulled from other resource platforms. The content is created by entrepreneurs who have disabilities themselves. "Representation matters," said Sahgal, "so we are trying to get entrepreneurs with disabilities to write their perspectives and get their feedback to ensure that the learning hub and its resources are completely accessible and that there is a community to build

synergies among entrepreneurs with disabilities." With this new learning hub, entrepreneurs don't need to wait for an i2i Program, they can access resources and get answers to questions now.

Recognizing that 50% of the population is unbanked or underbanked, Synergies Work understands that resources need to be financially accessible. Organizations on the platform will be able to offer resources at a discount for people with disabilities so that they can easily incorporate their business. "We hear stories of entrepreneurs unnecessarily paying thousands of dollars to lawyers to get an EIN, but an EIN does not require thousands of dollars!" said Sahgal.

The platform's resources answer questions about how to set up a bank account, how to get insurance, how to get a credit card, what a good credit score is and how to improve it, what the steps are to getting a loan, and other things that make businesses sustainable.

Synergies Work will be hosting its first EDDIE Awards Ceremony in April. The Entrepreneurs Dedicated to Diverse and Inclusive Excellence (EDDIE) Awards "is going to be the Oscar's of the entrepreneurial awards," said Sahgal.

"Nobody in the country is celebrating entrepreneurs with disabilities. This is an opportunity to put a spotlight on entrepreneurs and business leaders with disabilities. True to our mission of being bridge makers, that is what the awards night is going to be about," said Sahgal.

There will be six EDDIE awards: Entrepreneur of the Year Award, People's Favorite Award, Newcomer Award, Creativity Award, Social Impact Award, and Techpreneur Award.

The application process includes a committee to review applications and select finalists. Winners from across the country will be invited to the awards ceremony in Atlanta in April to meet business leaders and be recognized for the work they are doing. The winners will also receive benefits like business coaching and brand assessments. Applications close at the end of January and winners will be announced in March.

For more information, visit <https://synergieswork.org/>



Albany Technical College's Leveraging Education for Advancement Program Provides Opportunities for Students of All Abilities

By Hilary Vece

Albany Technical College (ATC) provides opportunities for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) to continue their education after high school through inclusive post secondary education (IPSE). IPSE programs like ATC's [Leveraging Education for Advancement Program \(LEAP\)](#) are gaining in popularity throughout the state of Georgia and across the country. There are now [314 IPSE programs in the U.S.](#) with [nine in Georgia](#).

LEAP focuses on developing academic, personal, and self-advocacy skills that lead to employment. Now in its sixth year, LEAP has 12 alumni. In Fall 2022, ten students were enrolled—its largest class yet.

“IPSE programs change the lives of our students, their households, and the belief that there is hope for people with developmental disabilities,” said Regina Watts, Director of Special Needs and LEAP Director at Albany Technical College.

LEAP is a unique IPSE option because students can earn one of fifteen certificates created for the program. Since all certificates are approved by the Technical College System of Georgia, any student at ATC can earn the certificates, not just LEAP students.

LEAP is an inclusive college program, meaning that students with IDD take courses alongside students without IDD. LEAP students are required to meet the same standards as all other students in their courses with some modifications, such as length of writing assignments. Additionally, LEAP students have support from mentor tutors that provide one-on-one attention to ensure students have the support they need to complete their coursework.

LEAP mentor tutors are education professionals, many who have experience working in the public school system. Mentor tutors assist students who may need extra help with reading comprehension as well as teaching life skills. With a focus on incorporating life skills into their existing coursework, mentor tutors teach students about time management and task attention during their one-on-one sessions.

To ensure that mentor tutors can provide quality attention to students, LEAP concentrates on offering 1-2 of the eligible certificates per year. Current students are earning their Business office Assistant or Early Childhood certificates. Last semester students earned Horticulture certificates.



IPSE programs change the lives of our students, their households, and the belief that there is hope for people with developmental disabilities

—Regina Watts
Director of Special Needs and LEAP Director
Albany Technical College





Photo by Albany Technical College

In addition to academics, LEAP focuses on independent living skills. Even on days they don't have courses, LEAP students come to campus to work with mentor tutors, to discuss current events, and to participate in campus-wide activities. LEAP students are fully integrated into all campus activities, including Homecoming, tailgating, and Spring Fling. They participate in community and volunteer activities, such as Toys for Tots, as well. Students also attend campus workshops on nutrition and healthy food choices.

ATC is located in an area of southwest Georgia where up to 90% of students live under the poverty level. Because of this, LEAP plans field trips to help students explore Georgia. Watts is currently planning a trip to explore Albany through civil rights museums, the heritage center, and local aquarium.

Watts hears stories from parents and students about how much the LEAP program has changed their lives for the better. "You cannot imagine how much development I saw in my daughter," one

mother shared. "When my daughter was finishing high school, I was asking everyone 'what now, what's next for my her?' Then I heard about the LEAP program."

"These are the types of stories I want a legislator to know," said Watts.

This piece is another in our [Include College](#) series of articles highlighting Georgia's IPSE programs.



Photo provided by Regina Watts

Calendar of Events

JANUARY

15-18

NAPSEC Annual Leadership Conference
Hosted by National Association of Private Special Education Centers
New Orleans, LA

[Info](#)

24

10am-12pm
&
6pm-8pm
GCDD Advocacy Day #1 Virtual Preparation:
Inclusive Post Secondary Education

[Morning Info](#)
[Evening Info](#)

25

9am-12pm
GCDD Advocacy Day #1 In-Person:
Inclusive Post Secondary Education
Georgia State Capitol, Atlanta, GA

[Info](#)

28

8am-3:30pm
FOCUS 36th Annual Education Conference
Hosted by FOCUS Oak Grove United Methodist Church
Decatur, GA

[Info](#)

FEBRUARY

15

10am-12pm
&
6pm-8pm
GCDD Advocacy Day #2 Virtual Preparation:
Waivers & Wages

[Morning Info](#)
[Evening Info](#)

16

9am-12pm
GCDD Advocacy Day #2 In-Person: Waivers & Wages
Georgia State Capitol, Atlanta, GA

[Info](#)

MARCH

March is Developmental Disabilities Awareness Month

7

10am-12pm
&
6pm-8pm
GCDD Advocacy Day #3 Virtual Preparation:
Employment First/Ending Subminimum Wage

[Morning Info](#)
[Evening Info](#)

8

9am-12pm
GCDD Advocacy Day #3 In-Person:
Employment First/Ending Subminimum Wage
Georgia State Capitol, Atlanta, GA

[Info](#)

20-22

Disability Policy Seminar
Hosted by seven national disability organizations
Washington, DC

[Info](#)

APRIL

TBD

GCDD Quarterly Council Meeting
April 2023

[Info](#)

17-19

Down Syndrome Advocacy Conference (DSAC)
Hosted by National Down Syndrome Society
Washington, DC

[Info](#)

27

EDDIE Awards (Entrepreneurs Dedicated to Diverse and
Inclusive Excellence)
Hosted by Synergies Work

[Info](#)



Submit an Event to GCDD's Event Calendar



Inclusively Uses Technology to Build Diverse Workforce with Inclusive Accommodations

By Hilary Vece

Inclusively is a workforce inclusion platform connecting job seekers with employers who are committed to attracting and retaining previously hidden talent.

“Diverse organizations lead their peers across multiple business indicators including 22% lower turnover rates, 28% higher revenue, and 39% higher customer satisfaction,” said Tiffany Meehan, Vice President of Marketing at Inclusively.

People with disabilities are often discounted as unemployable and negatively affected by application screening as well as concerns employers have about providing accommodations.

Job seekers provide their requests for the accommodations they will need for both interviews and in the workplace during their registration process on the Inclusively platform. This information is automatically shared with employers, and every person the job seeker interacts with are committed to meeting necessary accommodations. In some cases, training is provided to hiring managers or other employees to answer questions they may have.

“This is what sets us apart: our candidates trust us with their information because they know we’re working on their behalf to ensure they’re set up to succeed from the very first interaction.” said Meehan. “We believe putting accommodations upfront is the key to fostering trust

and inclusion in the workplace.”

“Changing a workflow or process at a large company often takes both commitment and persistence. We’ve found that it usually takes a bold leader to champion the cause, ensure its success, and then amplify early wins to inspire the broader organization to scale things up,” said Meehan. “The bottom line is that if you build an accommodating and inclusive culture, you will create engaged employees which leads to happy customers, and finally higher revenues from those happy customers.”

For more information visit:

<https://www.inclusively.com/>

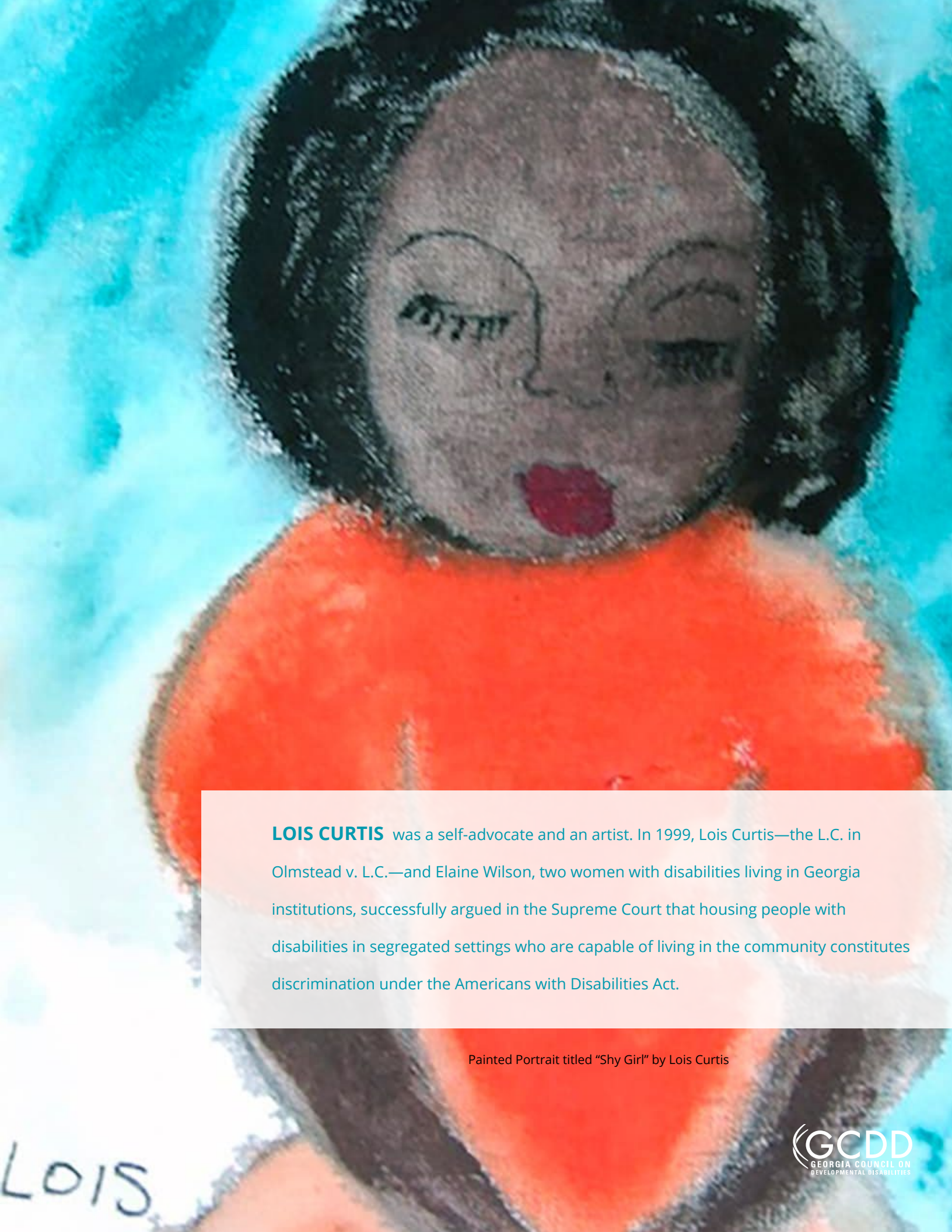


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Making a Difference magazine is available in English, Spanish, audio, and large print.
<https://magazine.gcdd.org>



LOIS CURTIS was a self-advocate and an artist. In 1999, Lois Curtis—the L.C. in *Olmstead v. L.C.*—and Elaine Wilson, two women with disabilities living in Georgia institutions, successfully argued in the Supreme Court that housing people with disabilities in segregated settings who are capable of living in the community constitutes discrimination under the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Painted Portrait titled "Shy Girl" by Lois Curtis