

A father's love for his daughter

forced the state to act



Thomas A. Coughlin

Advance Albany Bureau

ALBANY — Thomas A Coughlin 3rd glanced down at his notes, paused and then hinted broadly at the painful memories of Watertown late in the winter of '62.

"My involvement began in a very personal way," he told the senators. "Community-based services for severely retarded children were not plentiful 16 years ago — especially in Watertown."

With that one fleeting reference to Tracy Coughlin, born March 4, 1962 into the promise of a grim life, her daughter on the commissioner's hat and proceeded to testify about the joyful accomplishments and what's left to be done.

But the question of what to do with Tracy, pale, vulnerable, brain-damaged from birth, nevertheless remains the focal point of much, if not all, of Thomas A. Coughlin's doings and prayers.

"I was very bitter," Coughlin was saying after the hearing yesterday. "I was a state trooper used to operating in

a system of law. If the law said that driving at 70 miles per hour was a crime, you were supposed to go out and catch the offender."

"But government; I had no contact with it. I didn't understand what it was."

Coughlin was 23 at the time, already the father of two. He was running anxiously through Watertown, trying to find programs in which Tracy could participate after she'd grown up a bit.

"But there was absolutely nothing," Coughlin said, and by the time Tracy was 5, she'd fallen well behind her sisters. The seizures grew worse, along with the family's sadness. "It was getting very difficult for Joan, especially, who had the other children."

Reluctantly, the couple decided to put Tracy in Rome Developmental Center, a warehouse then, with thousands of residents.

Coughlin remembers the day well. "We walked her in, well fed and relatively happy. I went to see the director,

and he told me not to come back for six weeks because they need time to acclimate her."

"But I'll never forget the day I walked back into that center," Coughlin declared, his face twisted in a mild grimace. "She'd lost 30 pounds (for a 5-year-old that's no small amount). There were 120 kids on that second-floor ward of Building X, and you had to walk over the bed to get to the kids."

And it was on that day that Thomas A. Coughlin, furious, his blue eyes brimming with tears, vowed "to say to the state and all of the professionals, I'll show you I can do better."

Coughlin joined the Jefferson County Chapter of the state Association for Retarded Children and began attending college part-time. ("I realized that if I really wanted to do it, I would need a degree," he said.)

The rest is an Horatio Alger epic, with Coughlin's anger and bitterness giving him the direction.

In all the time he could spare from his

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