

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

Page 2

job, — even to the point of not applying himself to study for promotions — Coughlin set about as an organizer, founding program after program in Jefferson County.

He found an empty store and enlisted the aid of a retired Army officer to set up a workshop for five children, and from that humble beginning evolved a community program serving as a model for many communities in New York State.

He also monitored the state school where his daughter was — very very carefully.

Finally, in 1968, Coughlin took a leave of absence from the state troopers so he could go to school full time and become eligible for the paid position of an executive director of the ARC chapter. He was graduated from Goddard College in Plainfield, Vt., at the age of 33.

Thomas A. Coughlin was born in Brooklyn on Feb. 12, 1938. He attended Midwood High School and joined the Air Force upon graduation. He met his wife-to-be, Joan, when stationed in Watertown, N.Y.

In 1975, soon after Gov. Cary was inaugurated, he visited Jefferson County. Coughlin recalls that by that time, "we had opened eight community residences, brought about 250 of our children back home, and were providing full, comprehensive day programming for nearly 600 clients."

"The governor's satisfaction with our program led him to recommend me for the position of deputy commissioner for mental retardation," Coughlin's first public office. "His instructions to me were quite clear — 'Do the same thing on a statewide basis.'"

The job remains far from done, Coughlin admits, with Tracy, for one still not ready for placement in the community. She is now on Staten Island in the privately operated Nina Eaton Center, receiving specialized services, learning how to walk and talk again.

As for Coughlin, he wants to stay in his position for two, maybe three years. After too long, you know, public officials' ideas get stale. We need a change."

He enjoyed most being director of Willowbrook Development Center during the trying year of 1975. "I loved that so much that Dr. (Lawrence) Kolb (then commissioner of the Department of Mental Hygiene) literally had to pull me back to Albany to resume my duties there."

"And when I leave this job," Coughlin asserts, "I just want to go back to running programs, delivering services to any retarded kid in this state who needs them."

—SYDNEY FREEDBERG

Page
2 of 2