

January 2005

To the Judges of the Robert F. Kennedy Journalism Awards:

Last year saw new challenges to care for the most severely disabled people in the state of Massachusetts. The governor has said he wants to phase out the old state schools, including the Fernald Developmental Center in Waltham, the state's oldest public institution for the mentally disabled. The state's commissioner of mental retardation says the closure is only a matter of time.

Once home to 2,400 people, Fernald now holds fewer than 230, among them Susan Bolgen, who has lived at the center since 1956, when she was 5. Cerebral palsy and scoliosis have contorted her 90-pound, 4-foot-6-inch frame. She cannot walk nor speak, beyond a few garbled words or strained grunts. Each morning, staff members brush her teeth, comb her hair, and change her diaper.

Most reporters might walk on by, but Sweeney spent months, between other stories, at Fernald with Bolgen and three other patients, their care-givers, and regularly visiting family members. She found the person known as "Susie Q" would struggle to say "good morning" or "goodbye" to staff, would eagerly follow attendants as they read from children's books or celebrity magazines, would track the birds outside her window. Her parents, now in their 80s, wonder where Bolgen would go if Fernald were to close.

Sweeney's stories brought into full view the stakes involved in the decision to close, and inspired an extraordinary outpouring of calls and letters. As one letter-writer put it: "With close attention to detail and yet with fairness and impartiality, Sweeney has peeled away a number of myths and public misperceptions about care for the mentally retarded, such as the myth that institutions like Fernald are human warehouses or that the people living in them universally can and want to live elsewhere ... This is journalism at its best."

In proudly nominating Emily Sweeney for the Robert F. Kennedy Journalism Awards, we hope you agree.

Sincerely,

David Beard  
Regional Editor  
The Boston Globe  
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