

When I was growing up, my dad used to tell me about his cousin who had intellectual disabilities and lived at the institution in Milledgeville. The family told stories about how Aunt Georgia's boy could bend iron bars to escape the house at 10-years-old. And they said it took three grown men to hold him down when he ran off one day on a busy highway in Atlanta. They said this was the breaking point. The family used these stories to explain why they sent him to the institution in 1970. When I was a kid, I thought Milledgeville sounded like a scary place, and my dad's cousin sounded scary too. But these stories started to bother me and just didn't sound believable after I had my own son with Down syndrome in 2000. I wondered if my dad's cousin was anything like Andy, and I wondered if the family made up these super-human stories about him, when the real challenges in 1970 might have been the lack of support services available to them. He would have had no right to healthcare or an education or most of the services Andy has received.

When I moved back to Georgia, I connected with the Georgia Protection and Advocacy Office to try and find Keith in 2011. Through them, I learned that he was born in 1960 and sent to the institution in 1970, where he lived for about 35 years until he moved into a group home in 2004. He moved out of the institution after the landmark Supreme Court Olmstead decision ruled that if people could live outside of an institution, they should be given that opportunity. When I found Keith, my kids, my dad, and I all made arrangements to go visit him, and we also stopped by the institution where Keith had once lived. My dad was worried because he thought Keith might be like the stories. In reality, he really is much like Andy would have turned out without an education and family life. He's helpful and kind, but he didn't have meaningful family contact for over 40 years. He didn't go to school and can't read or write, and he goes to a day program instead of a job. I'm happy to share that since we connected with him, Keith has gone on vacations with us, he helps me make pies and cranberry sauce for the holidays, and we meet up for lunch. But his life is much different from my son's, who was born 40 years later.

Andy has a similar level of intellectual disability and has always lived with his family and has gone to school with his neighborhood peers. He rode his bike to get himself a job at 16 and independently navigates the world, and he plans to go to a post-secondary program or people with disabilities to study photography after he graduates. The primary difference between these two men born decades apart is not their genetic disabilities; it's access to supports and services.