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Robert and Martha Perske Papers

1939-2012 (*Bulk:* 1984-2012)

9 boxes (11.5 linear ft.)

Call no.: MS 772



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While serving with the U.S. Navy in the Philippines during World War II, the teenaged Bob Perske became aware of the vulnerable and disabled in society and turned his life toward advocacy on their behalf. Studying for the ministry after returning to civilian

life, Perske was appointed chaplain at the Kansas Neurological Institute, serving children with intellectual disabilities for 11 years, after which he became a full-time street, court, and prison worker — a citizen advocate — laboring in the cause of deinstitutionalization and civil rights of persons with disabilities, particularly those caught in the legal system. After Bob married his wife Martha in 1971, the two became partners in work, with Martha often illustrating Bob's numerous books and articles. In 2002, Perske was recognized by the American Bar Association as the only non-lawyer to ever receive the Paul Hearne Award for Services to Persons with Disabilities.

The Perske Papers contains a fifty year record of published and unpublished writings by Bob Perske on issues surrounding persons with disabilities, along with correspondence, photographs, and other materials relating to the Perskes' activism. The correspondence includes a particularly rich set of letters with a fellow advocate for persons with disabilities, Robert R. Williams.

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Background on Robert and Martha Perske

Robert (Bob) and Martha Perske have been advocating for persons with intellectual disabilities for the past five decades. Married in 1971, their work together began at the Kansas Neurological Institute (KNI), an institution providing care for 250 children with intellectual disabilities, where Bob served as chaplain. During this time he wrote the first article on ministry and mental retardation. His work was used by families, clergy, and congregations as a learning tool to better understand those with intellectual disabilities.

Throughout the 11 years Perske worked at KNI, his commitment to serving children with intellectual disabilities prompted other forms of service including joining several volunteer organizations that fought to end institutionalization of persons with disabilities. Perske went on to serve as executive director of the Greater Omaha Association for Retarded Citizens (GOARC), which created one of the earliest community based services in the nation, and later the Eastern Nebraska Office of Retardation (ENCOR), before becoming an advocate for persons with intellectual disabilities in prison, supporting clients and their attorneys in their fight for justice. In 2002, his more than two decades of advocacy were celebrated when he became the only non-lawyer to receive the American Bar Association's Paul Hearne Award for Services to Persons with Disabilities.

Among his many accomplishments, Bob Perske may be best known as the author of 16 books and hundreds of articles on topics ranging from caring for disabled children to providing support for families. Martha contributed to these efforts as illustrator and editor. She first began sketching the faces of the young residents at KNI and soon perfected her natural talent. Her drawings, simply executed in pencil but incredibly beautiful and expressive, illustrated first Bob's books and later two major reports on disabilities for Presidents Nixon and Carter and the 1981 International Year of Disabled Persons commemorative stamp.

Over the years, the couple have been recongnized for their contributions to the care and treatment of persons with intellectual disabilities and have won numerous awards. They continue their work in Darien, Connecticut, where they reside.

Scope of collection

The Perske Papers document the couple's life-long efforts to advocate for services and civil rights for persons with intellectual disabilities. As a compassionate observer of the challenges facing individuals with disabilities and their families, Bob Perske used his skills as a communicator to present ideas and connect people both through his writing and speeches. Martha, his partner in all things, used her natural talent as an artist and editor to compliment his writing. Their combined efforts are represented in drafts of speeches, published articles, and artwork.

Bob Perske was also instrumental in creating and maintaining networks of support for persons with intellectual disabilities wrongfully accused and convicted of crimes. Materials in the collection chronicle the status of various cases that he was involved in and include transcripts of interviews, media coverage, and his own communications. Images of the accused, sometimes



Bob and Martha Perske with their dog, Wolfie, 2004

photographed with Perske, further demonstrate his efforts to put faces to the names of these individuals as well as document his ongoing advocacy.

Series descriptions

Series 1. Writings

1965-2012

Bob Perske has been writing about the advocacy needs of persons with intellectual disabilities since his days as pastor at the Kansas Neurological Institute (KNI). Materials include several articles and speeches written and delivered by Bob as well as information about his efforts. Many of Perske's writings here relate to his work with persons with intellectual disabilities wrongfully accused and convicted of crimes. Materials also include the extensive writings of Robert (Bob) Williams, a leader in the disability movement, who is a long-time collaborator and friend with Perske. Williams' writings reflect his work as policy advisor and advocate as well as his personal history living with cerebral palsy expressed both in autobiographical pieces and in his poetry.

Series 2. Correspondence and Subject Files

1945-2012

Extensive correspondence files of Bob Perske concerning his writing, advocacy, and efforts on behalf of prisoners wrongly accused; includes correspondence of Bob Williams both with Perske and others. Subject files contain related publications, background or research materials, reports, transcripts, and poems.

Series 3. False Confessions

1974-2012

Files document Perske's work on behalf of persons with intellectual disabilities wrongfully accused and imprisoned. Materials are organized by the name of the individual and files include background information on crimes, legal cases, media coverage, efforts to rally support, and communications about the individual or the case.

Series 4. Photographs and Audiovisual

1939-2006

Images and some audio or visual materials related to the many cases of persons with intellectual disabilities wrongfully accused and convicted of crimes that Bob Perske documented and supported through his writing and other advocacy activities. Also includes some of Martha's artwork, images of Bob Williams, and several recorded speeches.

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Search terms

Subjects

Mental retardation--Social aspects

People with disabilities--Deinstitutionalization

People with disabilities--Legal status, laws, etc.

Contributors

Perske, Robert. [[main entry](#)]

Perske, Martha

Williams, Robert R.

Genres and formats

Photographs

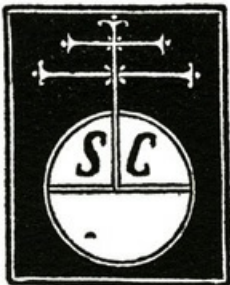
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