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Elmer C. Bartels Papers

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As the Commissioner of the Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission for thirty years, Elmer C. Bartels became a national leader on issues related to vocational rehabilitation and independent living for people with disabilities. While studying physics at Colby College in 1960, Bartels broke his neck in an inter-fraternity hockey game, but returned to complete his degree and then to earn an MS at Tufts. While working as a computer programmer at the Laboratory for Nuclear Science at MIT and later at Honeywell, he became involved in coordinating services and access that members of the community needed to survive. To address the range of issues relating to employment, housing, and architectural barriers for people with disabilities, he helped found three significant organizations: the Massachusetts Association of Paraplegiacs (1964), the Massachusetts Council of Organizations of the Handicapped (a cross-disability organization created in the late 1960s with Harold Remmes) and the Boston Center for Independent Living (1972). Bartels was a key figure in securing passage of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, considered the first civil-

rights statute for persons with disabilities. In 1977, Bartels was appointed to the Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission by Gov. Michael Dukakis, serving under seven successive administrations, leaving an important mark on public policy. Since leaving the MRC, Bartels has remained active as a teacher and advocate for disability issues.

The Bartels Papers are an important resource for study of the early history of disability advocacy and public policy in Massachusetts. The collection includes a wealth of material on the formation and activity of the Massachusetts Association of Paraplegics, the National Paraplegia Foundation, and the Mass Rehabilitation Commission; correspondence with other leading figures in the disability rights movement; and publications relating to legislation on disability issues, vocational rehabilitation, and independent living.

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Background on Elmer C. Bartels

As the Commissioner of the Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission for thirty years, Elmer C. Bartels became a national leader on issues related to vocational rehabilitation and independent living for people with disabilities. Bartels himself was a quadriplegic as the result of a spinal cord injury at the age of 22. After his rehabilitation, Bartels and his wife, Mary, went on to live lives devoted to securing disability rights for all.

Bartels was a lifelong citizen of New England, born the third of four children on June 10, 1938, in Newton, Massachusetts, to parents Elmer and Dorothy Bartels. Dorothy (née Burnett) had been a dressmaker before marriage, and Elmer senior was a renowned thyroid specialist at the Lahey Clinic in Boston. Bartels spent his childhood with his three sisters Jane Lee, Patsy, and Dorothy. From 1950-1960, beginning at the age of 12, Bartels spent summers at Camp Agawam in Redmond, Maine, first as a camper and later a counsellor. Bartels remained an active camp alum and advocate for the rest of his life, donating time and resources to Agawam to ensure campers of all abilities could have the same positive experience he had benefited from so greatly.

After high school, Bartels attended Hebron Academy in Maine for one year before entering as a freshman to Colby College in Waterville, Maine. At the age of 22, while studying physics at Colby College, Bartels broke his neck in an inter-fraternity hockey game on December 5, 1960. His spinal cord severed at the C4/5 level, meaning he was paralyzed from the chest down with limited use of his upper arms. Following his injury, Bartels was moved to the Deaconess Hospital Intensive Care Unit for a laminectomy, next to the Spinal Cord Injury Center, and finally the Robinson Building, nicknamed "Robby Seven," at Massachusetts Memorial Hospital for rehabilitation.

In six months, Bartels was ready to continue his rehabilitation at Lemuel Shattuck Hospital in Jamaica Plain, Boston. It was there, out of a life changing injury, that a life changing love story, and a lifelong disability activist partnership, would bloom. Bartels met nurse Mary Foster on his first day at Shattuck in June of 1962. They married the day he was discharged from the hospital, on January 21, 1962. With Mary's undying devotion as a wife, skill as a trained nurse, and work as a co-student, the couple spent their first few months of marriage in Waterville, Maine living in motels and commuting to Colby to complete Bartels' undergraduate degree in physics in 1962. Bartels continued on to earn an MS in physics at Tufts University. During the Tufts years, the couple welcomed their first child, Joanne. They later adopted their son, Elmer James, in 1972. Bartels noted in 2005 that, "for Mary, no problem was too big. We charged into life without planning it, but with a lot of faith that somehow or other it would work — and it did."

While working as a computer programmer at the Laboratory for Nuclear Science at MIT, and later at Honeywell, Bartels became involved in coordinating services and access that members of the community needed to survive. His early work with computers and training programs in the 1960s inspired Bartels' early reports about computerized vocational rehab and training for people with disabilities. To address the range of issues relating to employment, housing, and architectural barriers for people with disabilities, he helped found three significant organizations: the Massachusetts Association of Paraplegics (1964), the Massachusetts Council of Organizations of the Handicapped (a cross-disability organization created in the late 1960s with Harold Remmes), and the Boston Center for Independent Living (1972). Bartels was a key figure in securing passage of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, considered the first civil-rights statute for persons with disabilities, and later the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. In 1977, Bartels was appointed to the Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission (MRC) by Gov. Michael Dukakis, serving thirty years under seven successive administrations, leaving an important mark on public policy. After leaving the MRC in 2007, Bartels remained active as a teacher and advocate for disability issues. Bartels passed away on July 5, 2014 at the age of 76.

Scope of collection

The Bartels Papers are an important resource for study of the early history of disability advocacy and public policy in

Massachusetts and the greater New England area, spanning the mid-1960s through 2010. The collection includes a wealth of material on the formation and activity of the Massachusetts Association of Paraplegics, the National Paraplegia Foundation, and the Mass Rehabilitation Commission; correspondence with other leading figures in the disability rights movement; and publications relating to legislation on disability issues, vocational rehabilitation, and independent living. The collection is organized alphabetically.

Bartels' collection includes a numerous draft and final reports related to disabilities legislation. Bartels organized a number of papers by organization. These organization files contain assorted papers under a variety of categories including correspondence to, from, and between the various organizations of which he was a member or with whom he partnered; publications including handbooks, pamphlets, newsletters, clippings; and internal documentation such as by-laws, meeting agendas, meeting minutes, notes on mission goals, and memos.

From 1978 to 2001, Bartels and his assistants labeled much of the media he received as "Fan Files." These files include thank-you notes from individuals and organizations, birthday cards, holiday cards, commemorative cards, funeral programs, newspaper clippings, awards certificates and ceremony programs, invitations (including one from the White House's Clinton Administration), letters of professional support, and printed emails.

Within the Mass Rehabilitation Commission files are Bartels' papers associated with his retirement from the MRC in 2007. He continued as an educator and disability rights activist until his passing in 2014. One of his final projects was a book, pending publication as of 2019, about his life's work, *The Road Taken: The Personal and Political Life of a Disability Rights Activist*. Bartels' daughter, Joanne, admirably noted she wants to add a section about her father's strength of character before publication. Some of the materials Bartels set aside for the book are in this collection.

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