



Mobile's Jeff Ridgeway continues fight for disabled in Alabama

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By **Casandra Andrews, Press-Register**

MOBILE, Alabama -- Jeff Ridgeway is transitioning from his role as president of People First of Alabama to a new position within the advocacy group, but he said he's not letting down his fight to champion the rights of those with physical and intellectual disabilities.

After three years, he recently stepped down from the elected post to accept a paid position as a state coordinator within the 700-member group.

Later this summer, Ridgeway, 48, will be among a group from Alabama traveling to a national People First of America conference in St. Paul, Minn., where he plans to make presentations and join focus groups to talk about his work on behalf of others.

Last fall, Ridgeway spent weeks gathering grassroots support statewide to defeat a zoning effort in Northport that he feared would push disabled people out of the city. The ordinance - which came as the state began closing the W.D. Partlow Developmental Center in neighboring Tuscaloosa - sought to limit the number of group homes within Northport.

Ridgeway's efforts put a statewide spotlight on the ordinance, which the eventually was abandoned.

Ridgeway, who can't drive because of a health condition, typically rises long before dawn to board buses when he travels to Montgomery and elsewhere for his advocacy work. He was born with a hole in his heart and other birth defects that affected his sight and hearing.

Undaunted by obstacles, he has spent years lobbying for help, care and compassion for those with physical and intellectual disabilities.

A highlight came on the last night of the 2008 Legislature, when Ridgeway won approval of a bill requiring that new state laws refer to people with disabilities as people first. For example, a blanket reference to "the disabled" would become to "individuals with disabilities" and "mentally ill" could be "individuals with mental illness."



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Jeff Ridgeway, former president of People First of Alabama, accepted a new role with the group recently, as he continues his fight to advocate for the physically and intellectually disabled.

His newest project, an initiative with the Alabama Department of Mental Health known as Employment First, aims to put more people with disabilities into the workforce.

"There are people in the state that prefer people with disabilities to be in day programs and workshops," he said. "People First wants people to have the opportunity to have real jobs with real pay. We hope it works."

Before his advocacy work consumed most of his time, Ridgeway spent 15 years employed at a Bruno's grocery store in Mobile, where he did everything from stocking shelves to sweeping the aisles to unloading trucks.

"We all know there are going to be some people who are never going to work on their own," he said. "But the ones who can should not be penalized for someone else's medical condition. We are advocating that Employment First be given a real chance and a real look by everyone in the disability community."

As the mental health landscape in Alabama continues to change -- such as the Partlow closing and a new focus on community-based care -- Ridgeway said he is also looking to keep an open dialogue with state leaders.

Some of the work he's been most proud of, though, is showing others how they can "come out of their shell" and stand up for themselves.

Ridgeway often gets questions about how he and People First could accomplish so much.

"A lot of people wonder, 'How can a little group like People First make it?'" he said. "It's all about membership and not being steamrolled into something unfair and unjust." □

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