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Georgia Governor Sonny Perdue's Extraordinary Speech Before the 3rd Annual Immersion Learning

(Sponsored by the Center for Self-Determination and Co-Hosted by the Georgia Developmental Disabilities Council)

Good afternoon. It is my pleasure to welcome you to the 2004 National Immersion Learning about Self-Determination Conference.

I understand we have representatives here from 24 states today. Welcome to Georgia!

We're very happy to host this conference, because we've got a lot of work to do here in Georgia regarding self-determination for people with disabilities and their families.

I know many of you come from states that are further along than Georgia in this area. You come with good ideas, best practices, and the advantage of experience.

And I expect my Georgia team to have their writing pads out and take good notes!

We are looking forward to a good exchange of ideas.

The purpose of self-determination is to help individuals with disabilities live lives more rich in relationships and community.

And to share with all our citizens the opportunity to work and contribute as equal members of the society.

In short, it's about empowering people and erasing the boundaries that hold people back from their full potential.

And to say that in even less words...it's about freedom.

And you can't get more basic than that.

Let's look at it this way.....this is going to sound like a detour, but it's not.

In America, the most fundamental purpose of government is to protect and expand human freedom.

Isn't that what this country is supposed to be about? It's right there in the Declaration of Independence: "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

That's what we all want. That's what we all have a right to, as Americans. As human beings, created

equal.

Our local, state and federal governments do a lot of things.

But scratch down to the core and the business they ought to be about.....first and foremost...is protecting and expanding our freedom.

Our life, liberty and pursuit of happiness. That's the promise the American people made to ourselves in 1776.

And you could look at the unfolding of our history since then as a long process of fulfilling that promise.

For some groups in our society, redeeming that promise has come slowly, and painfully.

At different points in time, America may have thought the work was done, only to realize we've had blinders on and there is more work to do, and more promises to keep.

I certainly believe that has been true for Americans with disabilities. But we continue to try and take those blinders off and keep that promise....and what we're doing this week is part of it.

A couple of weeks ago I spoke at the Little White House in Warm Springs, commemorating the life of President Franklin Roosevelt. As you know, Georgia was a second home for FDR.

After he was stricken with polio in his late 30s, long before he was President, Roosevelt came to Warm Springs seeking relief.

This was in an era when society really did have it's blinders on when it came to people with disabilities.

But I was reminded of Roosevelt's story again as I prepared to come here today and speak about self-determination.

That was something Roosevelt enjoyed, uncommon for his era.....and even for many people in ours.

In Roosevelt's case, it was due to his personal resources.....and his personal determination not to be sidelined by disability.

But he had all those things we talk about empowering our disabled citizens with: Roosevelt had the freedom to design his own life. He had the funds to get whatever assistance was necessary. He had the control to design his own care. He could arrange the support structures he needed. He was certainly able to be a contributing member of the community.

Now FDR was an exceptional case in many ways, obviously.

But his story illustrates the value of self-determination for individuals...and for the greater good of the community.

Is there a Franklin Roosevelt of more modest means out there now, who will fulfill his or her full potential through your work?

Maybe. Maybe not. We don't know.

But we do know there are thousands of Georgians and millions of Americans with disabilities who can enjoy greater fulfillment and pursuit of happiness.....

And who will be helped to do that as this principle of self-determination takes root in our approach to serving their needs.

To be self-determined people need some pretty basic things: A place to call home. A chance to learn. A way to generate income through a job. Access to transportation. Basic things most of us take for granted....the things that give us options in life.

I have a vision in which people with disabilities are engaged as full participants in all our communities.

To reach that point, many people require the publicly funded system of services and supports.

But we should design that system always keeping in mind the fundamental mission of expanding freedom.

We should seek a system of services that supports independent living and increased quality of life.

Our system should provide individuals of all ages - and their families - with the ability to make meaningful, informed choices about the services they receive.

Those services should meet standards of quality and accountability. They should be cost-effective - and consistent with the individual's values and preferences.

Georgia is committed to self-determination for people with disabilities and their families.

And while we're not as far along as some of your home states, we've been moving forward.

The Georgia Self-Determination Team has been conducting self-determination training across the state.

And the Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities has brought national experts to Georgia to meet with key leaders in the advocacy movement and state agencies to discuss establishing self-determination

Also, last year I directed our Department of Community Health and the Department of Human Resources to work with the Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities to develop a self-determination pilot project that is scheduled to launch this fall.

Among other features, it will empower individuals and families to make decisions about how resources are used to provide support.

It's a baby step in some ways....but one result has been getting the two primary state departments that serve people with disabilities working together like never before.

And to ensure accountability to those we serve.....we're ensuring that people with disabilities are at the decision-making table, working with policymakers to make self-determination a reality.

The blinders are coming off.

So I thank you again for coming to Georgia to discuss this important subject.

You're helping keep that promise of freedom for people with disabilities....

You're empowering people, erasing boundaries.....and you're pointing the way to a more fulfilling life, greater liberty, and a true pursuit of happiness for all our citizens.

That's not a bad way to spend the week!

April 29, 2004 ~ Atlanta, Georgia

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