

## ***LEARNING FROM MY EXPERIENCES***

Roberta Gallant

**R**ight after my birth, a doctor labeled me “mentally retarded.” In our society, people often believe that someone whom doctors diagnosed with MR is unable to learn. When I was young, New Hampshire, like all of the other states in America, denied citizens with the MR diagnosis access to a free and appropriate public education.

As a child, I lived at Laconia State School. I desired to fit in with the kids there who knew how to read and write. Between the ages 9 and 10, I saw the other students read books in the classrooms at the State School. I started asking people at Laconia State School to teach me how to read and write. I was persistent. I refused to stop begging them until they finally agreed to teach me. I became a fluent reader and writer in my teen years. Through my experiences, I learned that self-advocacy is my key to success.

As an adult, I used my self-advocacy skills to convince Community Bridges to let me get tutoring at Parker Academy. I love knowing how to read. Being able to read lets me work on the computer, go grocery shopping, travel, and work at my two jobs. Having writing skills enables me to write letters, email messages, articles, and speeches.

I recommend that children with disabilities and their parents strengthen their advocacy skills. Kids with disabilities have to work harder than average students do; but children with disabilities *can* learn, and they need to believe in themselves. Parents and children with disabilities ought to encourage their schools to offer the help that they need to learn how to read and write.