

Willing and able

For nearly four decades, Lu Zeph has championed community inclusion for students with severe disabilities

By Kristen Andresen

LU ZEPH'S OFFICE is a maze of books, grant paperwork and research articles. A sculpture of a flying moose is suspended from the ceiling.

Why the sculpture? Well, most of what Zeph has accomplished — first as a teacher and early interventionist, later as a UMaine professor, and today as a leading authority on inclusive education and public policy for those with developmental disabilities — were the types of things that were only supposed to happen when moose could fly.

Zeph has made the impossible possible for nearly four decades.

When she started her career in the early 1970s, children with severe disabilities were either segregated or forgotten when it came to education. Many were placed in institutions or nursing homes. The general assumption was they couldn't learn, so why bother? Others were sent to "special" schools.

Neither of these options sat well with Zeph.

"The education of children with severe disabilities is even more critical because it affects their whole quality of life," says Zeph, director of the University of Maine's Center for Community Inclusion and Disability Studies (CCIDS). "What these kids mostly needed was what other children already had — the opportunity to learn."

To say Zeph has been involved with nearly every major advance in education for students with severe disabilities would not be an overstatement. She has advised Congress on landmark legislation. She has served in leadership roles in national associations. She was a sounding board for mainstreaming in Maine schools. In 1999, she was awarded a prestigious Kennedy Public Policy Fellowship in Washington, D.C., and was later called back to Washington for a year to serve as executive director of the Joseph P. Kennedy Jr., Foundation.

Timeline: Critical Events Related to the Evolution of Inclusive Education in Maine and the U.S.

1954 Brown v. Board of Education, a Supreme Court decision that established the rights of all children to participate in unsegregated education. Established that children could not be segregated by race. This law became the basis for later lower court decisions related to access to education for children with disabilities.

1961 President John F. Kennedy appoints a President's Panel on Mental Retardation.

1966 President Lyndon Johnson establishes the permanent President's Committee on Mental Retardation, now known as the President's Committee for People with Intellectual Disabilities.

1970 Passage of the Developmental Disabilities Services and Facilities Construction Act amendments, establishing the federal definition of developmental disabilities and what has become a national network of University Centers for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities Education, Research and Service.



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At UMaine, she developed the master's specializations in severe disabilities and early intervention, and coordinated the undergraduate and graduate interdisciplinary concentrations in developmental disabilities that are now a part of disability studies. She is the driving force behind CCIDS, which has brought in more than \$50 million in grants since 1992.

"The field of severe disabilities and I grew up together, and at each point where it needed to evolve, my thinking was typically way ahead of where things were," says Zeph, who joined UMaine's education faculty in 1979 as coordinator of graduate study in severe disabilities. "I had a reputation, both in the state and nationally, for pushing the envelope and wanting more, expecting more and trying to create more."

EARLY IN HER career in Maine, no program was legally required to serve preschool children with disabilities. But in four counties of midcoast Maine where she was running one of the state's first programs in early intervention, Zeph made sure they did. With little funding and often few resources, she'd barter. For example, if a preschool would give a child with disabilities a place in its program, she would offer to do developmental screenings for all its children.

In the late '70s as director of a private school for students with severe disabilities in Brewer, Maine, she made it her mission to close her school and others like it so that these children could learn in a public school setting, alongside same-age peers.

Zeph wasn't just fighting for mainstreaming, she was fighting for the rights of children with the most complex needs, including those with multiple physical and cognitive disabilities.

Her position was often unpopular among parents, teachers and administrators. But she pushed on, because she is an innovator. And, when she needs to be, an instigator.

"People thought what I was proposing was impossible, but I became committed

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Lu Zeph

to the idea that what is now called 'inclusive education' was the best way of educating all children," Zeph says. "All of the kids learn something. They see the

struggle of a kid who can't walk or talk, or a kid who can barely pick up a pencil and they become more respectful, they find something nice inside themselves. What I learned is that we're all better for it."

IN 1975, Congress passed the Education for All Handicapped Children Act. The regulations governing that law, which were enacted in 1977, called for the right to a free, appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment. Schools suddenly had a need for teachers who were trained to work with this population.

When UMaine special education faculty set out to meet that need with a graduate program, they knew just whom to call — the woman who had made headlines for closing down schools and dreaming of something better.

"It's a great challenge to figure out how to teach (these children), and that's what got me," Zeph says. "I hoped to teach teachers how to problem solve, how to be creative, to instill the quest for figuring it out, doing what other people didn't think was possible."

She and her small cadre of students were trailblazers, and they knew the future of how these children were educated in Maine hinged on their dedication.

"One of the things Lu always emphasized was that it wasn't just being a



"What these kids mostly needed was what other children already had — the opportunity to learn." Lu Zeph

teacher and passing on skills," says one of those early graduate students, James Artesani, who is now an associate professor of special education at UMaine. "It was looking at people more holistically to find out where these things fit in with a student's overall quality of life."

As these students graduated, most became teachers in these schools. Today, many of them are considered leaders in the field in Maine and beyond.

"I think in many ways, it allowed Maine to really be at the forefront of the education of this population of children," Zeph says. "What was then highly

unusual — to educate children with very complicated needs in a general education setting along with same-age peers — created a standard. Now it's the norm."

ZEPH LEARNED early on that the best way to improve the quality of life for one student is to improve it for every student, systemically. That became the focus of her doctoral study in educational leadership and policy at Vanderbilt University, where she got her degree in 1983. Since then, she has been actively shaping public policy at the state and national levels.

In 1992, she became the founding

director of the Center for Community Inclusion and Disability Studies at UMaine. One of 67 University Centers for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities Education nationwide, it is a resource for professionals, researchers, advocates and individuals with disabilities and their families throughout Maine. It focuses on interdisciplinary education, research and public policy analysis, community outreach, and the creation and dissemination of resources and publications.

Though the educational climate has improved significantly for students with disabilities since Zeph entered the field, there is still work to be done. Today, the challenge is less about placing students with disabilities in public schools and more about providing learning opportunities that result in enhancing their quality of life.

"What I've learned over the years is try not to place limitations on what's possible," Zeph says. "For the kids that we're talking about, this community, just because they don't learn the same way other kids do doesn't mean there have to be limitations to their learning. The challenge to us — and I think what the excitement is — is how do we figure this out? Their differences create more of a challenge for us to figure out how to help them achieve all that they can achieve." ■

1972 PARC v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, a class-action suit brought by parents of children with intellectual disabilities challenging the exclusion of their children from public schools. This case affirmed both the right to education for these students and the right to education in the least restrictive educational environment.

1972 Mills v. Board of Education, U.S. District Court decision that the District of Columbia could not exclude students with disabilities.

1973 Passage of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 prohibiting discrimination in federal programs and services, and all programs receiving federal funds. Section 504 specifically prohibited discrimination on the basis of handicap from

participation in any program or activity receiving federal assistance.

1974 American Association for the Education of the Severely and Profoundly Handicapped was incorporated. This organization, later renamed The Association for the Severely Handicapped (TASH) was the first national association committed to making a difference in the lives of individuals with the most

complex disabilities. TASH led the educational community through the phases of access to public schools, integration into schools and classrooms, and, ultimately, the full inclusion of students with disabilities into neighborhood schools and classrooms with their same-age peers.

1975 Passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA), a federal

law that established the right to a free, appropriate, public education for all children, regardless of the severity of their disabilities, in the least restrictive environment. This law was later renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

1977 Establishment of federal funding priorities to create a competitive grant program to fund colleges and universities

to prepare special educators to teach students with severe disabilities.

1977 EHA and Section 504 regulations issued.

1979 University of Maine College of Education awarded federal funding and establishes graduate study for education specialists in severe disabilities.

1981 Maine Department of Education develops certification requirements for teachers of students with severe disabilities.

1990 Passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

1994 Holland v. Sacramento City Unified School District affirms the right of children with disabilities to attend public

school classes with nondisabled peers.

1997 IDEA amendments require that students with disabilities have access to the general education curriculum.

2008 Amendments to the Higher Education Act establish opportunities for access to higher education and federal financial aid to students with intellectual disabilities.