

Former state school resident gets his wish to be buried on the institution grounds

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Sunday, June 24, 2018

BELCHERTOWN — Donald Vitkus' final act of advocacy is being buried at the Warner-Pine Grove Cemetery among his "brothers and sisters" of the former Belchertown State School.

On Saturday, Vitkus, 74, who spent more than two decades helping the developmentally disabled, had his dying wish granted. His cremated remains were lowered to his resting place alongside the people he grew up with at the institution where allegations of neglect and abuse prompted a class action lawsuit.

Vitkus, who died in January, was placed at the state school as a 6-year-old foster child and lived there until he was 17. He died in January. His is the first burial at the cemetery, where there are 204 other gravesites, in nearly a decade.

Nearly 70 of Vitkus' friends, family members and people touched by his work gathered for an emotional memorial service in the secluded, wooded area off Turkey Hill Road.

"For those of you who knew him, you knew he was a humble guy just talking to him," said his son, David Vitkus. "He was not only humble, but he was extremely grateful for his family, his friends, and for the opportunities he received that his brothers and sisters hadn't. He was always keenly aware of the opportunities he received that others simply didn't."

David Vitkus said that his father was a compassionate man, always concerned with the well-being of his friends and family.

"As much as we are here to honor a man who accomplished a great deal coming from practically nothing, I think he would want me to say one last thank you for being there for him, and for us, during what turned out to be a remarkable evolution of a man —

from a lost boy, to an advocate, husband, father and grandfather," David said. "So thank you very much."

Vitkus died Jan. 24 at the Ralph H. Johnson Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Charleston, South Carolina. Previously, he had lived at the VA Central Western Massachusetts Healthcare System in Leeds.

He is survived by his wife, Patricia Vitkus of Savannah, Georgia, a son and daughter, a stepdaughter and four grandchildren.

William Vitkus, 23, of Tucson, Arizona, said he grappled with his grandfather's desire to be buried at the Warner-Pine Grove Cemetery for a long time.

"It didn't seem fair that after the struggle to get away he would want to come full circle this way," William Vitkus said. "But that's not how he saw it. The people buried here were his first family members, or the closest thing he had. It says something that he's buried here alongside them because they never had an honest chance. Most lived and died at the school."

Born on May 12, 1943, in Waltham to a mother and father he never knew, Vitkus was surrendered to state custody at just 27 days old. Shuttled through six foster homes before the age of 6, Vitkus eventually landed at the Belchertown State School, which classified him as a "moron" at the age of 3 based on an IQ test, although he was not mentally handicapped.

For 11 years, between 1949 and 1960, Vitkus lived at the state school, which housed up to 1,300 people behind barred windows in locked wards. A federal class action lawsuit brought about the closure of the school in 1992 after 70 years.

Retired English teacher Ed Orzechowski, of Northampton, authored the book "You'll Like It Here" about Vitkus, and he spoke at the memorial service.

"It's a rare privilege to be allowed to share someone's life like this and I am incredibly thankful for it," said Orzechowski, whose sister-in-law was also a resident of the Belchertown State School.

Orzechowski began interviewing Vitkus shortly after meeting him at Holyoke Community College in 2005. They would meet at Orzechowski's home and talk over the dining room table where there were long pauses as Vitkus would retrieve memories.

"Many of them were painful memories and there would be tears," Orzechowski said. "He would always apologize and say 'sorry' many times. I would ask him if this is too much and he said 'no, it's difficult, but I need to do it.'"

Though many at the state school had severe disabilities, there were those, like Vitkus, who ended up there because they were misdiagnosed, orphaned or simply unwanted.

“Living in that place affected his sense of self-worth for his whole life,” William Vitkus said, which is why it made it difficult for him to understand why he wanted to be buried there.

“I think at the end of the day it was less about him and more about his brothers and sisters buried there,” he said.

After leaving the Belchertown State School Vitkus served in Vietnam in the U.S. Army as a private first class from 1964 to 1966. When he returned he worked at U.S. Envelope in West Springfield for 30 years until the plant closed in 2003. At that point, he returned to school and got an associate degree in human services from Holyoke Community College in 2005 at the age of 62.

Vitkus then worked as a personal caregiver and began speaking out about the need for better treatment of the disabled. He served as vice president of Advocacy Network Inc. of Amherst.

In March of this year Vitkus was named posthumous recipient of the Dr. Benjamin Ricci Commemorative Award in a ceremony at the Massachusetts Statehouse. Ricci, whose son lived at the state school, was part of the group that initiated the class action suit.

At the burial service, Helena Vitkus said that when she hears her grandfather’s name, “my heart swells with pride.”

Her grandfather’s “big, boisterous” laugh is something she will never forget, she said.

“It was sort of a half-roar, half-honk and saying that out loud doesn’t sound half as good as it actually was,” Helena said. “But when I heard it, it brought joy to me every time.”

Orzechowski said that Vitkus could have been buried at the Massachusetts Veterans Memorial Cemetery in Agawam but he chose Pine Grove instead because, in his opinion, “Donald left Belchertown but Belchertown never left him.”

Orzechowski ended his speech with a parting message: “Donald, you are surrounded by friends today and I am proud to be one of them.”

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