



INTERVIEW | ANNE LARCADE

'THE GOVERNMENT BROKE THE LAW AND MADE PEOPLE SUFFER'

ANNE LARCADE of Huntsville, Ont., is the lead plaintiff in a \$500-million class-action lawsuit against the Ontario government. Five years ago, her severely disabled son, Alexandre, then 9, needed specialized 24-hour care that she could not provide. She either had to legally abandon Alex to Children's Aid, which then would place him in the necessary home, or allow the boy to go without the care he required. She was left with that proposition because, in 1999, the province stopped issuing "special needs agreements" to fund residential care for severely disabled children who were not wards of the state. That left hundreds of families

in financial and emotional turmoil. Last week, André Marin, Ontario's ombudsman, delivered a scathing report demanding that the provincial government "do the right thing" and reinstate special needs agreements. The province promised to restore parental custody in existing cases, but made no further funding commitments.

The Ontario government saved money when it cancelled special needs agreements. But what did that cost you?

It's impossible to describe what it's like to be staring at a letter demanding you to sign a declaration that says you're abandoning your child to the Children's Aid Society. It's a horrible position to be in, especially after

years of scrambling desperately to find workable solutions and decent care for our son.

What exactly are his disabilities?

He has behavioural, sensory and psychiatric disorders. He has severe developmental delay, he's cognitively delayed, he has anxiety disorder, he's bipolar, he has a speech impediment, and he has difficulty with sound and light stimulus, similar to that of an autistic child. Physically, he has intermittent blindness in one eye, he's incontinent and his fingers don't work in a coordinated way, so he can no longer do up buttons or tie his shoes or cut his food. He has almost no short-term memory—he's been telling me the same knock-knock joke for four years. He's very social and he has learned to read and write.

How did his condition affect your lives?

Our lives were focused on his needs. He had feeding tubes and oxygen tanks, we did intensive physio with him and learned sign language to help him communicate. It was isolating—we never had people into our home and we didn't go out. When Alex was 7, my husband and I separated. He left the country for the next two years and I moved to a new city with Alex and his one-year-old brother. I had no family close by, I started a new job, and had no live-in care. A couple of years later Alex started to regress and no one could figure out why. One day he went blind in one eye, and he couldn't tie his shoes. He was frightened, and that manifested as rage and panic attacks on me, which raised issues of safety for the whole family.

What prompted you to sue the government?

After I went public with my story, I heard from hundreds of parents who were also struggling to do the very best for their kids. I know parents who have given up their jobs to provide full-time care for their children. They're on welfare. The government's decision broke the law and made a lot of people suffer. I'm determined to right this wrong and get special needs agreements reinstated.

Are you happy with the provincial ombudsman's report?

Yes. He reprimanded the Ministry of Children and Youth Services; he documented the anguish of the families; and he made appropriate conclusions. With this report, he validated my five-year struggle.

MEG FLOYD