

Robert Kennedy once said, “Few men are willing to brave the disapproval of their fellows, the censure of their colleagues, the wrath of their society. Moral courage is a rarer commodity than bravery in battle or great intelligence. Yet it is the one essential, vital quality of those who seek to change a world which yields most painfully to change.” He was referring specifically to those who spoke out, marched and protested during the civil rights movement. But his words can be applied to some Rhode Island seniors who were willing to speak up during our recent successful effort to prevent the elimination of the Rhode Island Pharmaceutical Assistance for the Elderly (RIPAE) program.

It’s well established that the most effective force for preserving any social program is the personal testimony and involvement of the persons who rely on that program. In preparing our campaign to save RIPAE, the Senior Agenda Coalition sought seniors who relied on RIPAE and would be willing to testify in public about what the program meant to them. They would need the courage to talk frankly about their medical conditions, to admit their income was modest, and in short, to “put a human face on the issue.”

It wasn’t difficult for us to find seniors who used RIPAE—over 18,000 were enrolled. Many RIPAE users would describe passionately, in private, the great hardship they would suffer if the program were eliminated. However, they didn’t want to testify in public. This was not surprising. Who of us would have the courage to speak publicly about such personal matters? In our society, and especially in our small state where everyone knows everyone else, talk radio demagogues and some politicians routinely bash poor people for being poor. They seek to make it shameful to seek help from any program.

Fortunately, we were able to find some wonderful seniors who possessed that rare commodity of moral courage that Robert Kennedy was talking about. Jane Natale, whose limited mobility made it difficult for her to come to the State House, allowed me to tell her story in my testimony before the House and Senate Finance Committees. She allowed me to use her name and provide details of her medical conditions. Ella Perry testified before the House Finance Committee (and its cable tv camera), and also agreed to be interviewed and quoted by a Providence Journal reporter. Joanne Devlin did an in-depth interview and had her picture taken by a local AP reporter for a story that ran in newspapers around the country.

They are the heroines who share the honor of this victory. Their words were more powerful than any testimony I could ever have written. The 18,000 people who depend on RIPAE, as well as all of us who believe in social justice, owe them our profound thanks.