

# Landmark Legacy



Photo: Anna Miller

To Eric Ricci, D17, he was just Uncle Benny.

“Someone once described him as a one-man hurricane,” Eric Ricci said. “There was something in him that didn’t let him rest on his laurels, that made sure he was doing the most he possibly could.”

Benjamin Ricci’s son, Bobby, diagnosed as mentally retarded by doctors at Boston Children’s Hospital, went to live at the former Belchertown State School in Massachusetts in 1953; he was just 6. Benjamin saw firsthand the poor conditions and lack of health care at the state facility. He led a successful class action lawsuit against the Commonwealth of Massachusetts to obtain better health services for patients in state-run facilities and wrote about his lifelong crusade on behalf of the disabled in the book *Crimes Against Humanity*. His efforts paved the way for health services like Tufts Dental Facilities (TDF), a 40-year partnership between Tufts and the state to provide oral health care to patients with intellectual

and physical disabilities at seven clinics around the state.

**“Uncle Benny was on the forefront of the civil rights movement for people with special needs.”**

“When we think of civil rights, we often think about race,” Eric Ricci said. “But it’s much more than that. Rights for people with disabilities and special needs are an often-forgotten aspect of civil rights. Uncle Benny was on the forefront of the civil rights movement for people with special needs, and that is something that I am incredibly proud of.”

Eric Ricci had no shortage of role models growing up. Uncle Benny was an emeritus professor of exercise science at the University of Massachusetts; both he and Eric’s grandfather, Rudolph Ricci, fought in World War II. Eric’s father, John Ricci, D83, is a practicing dentist, and Eric always knew he wanted to follow in his father’s footsteps. (He’ll join his practice in Rhode Island after graduation.)

“Uncle Benny, my grandfather and my dad are three of the many positive role models I was fortunate to have in my life. They instilled a lot of pride in me and taught me that your life is not just all about you,” Eric Ricci said. “You only have one life, and you need to use that life to improve someone else’s.”

At Tufts, he did an externship at the TDF clinic in Worcester, working with the same population that his great-uncle fought for more than four decades ago. Many of his patients there, in fact, are known as “Ricci Class” patients because they were directly affected by the class-action lawsuit brought by Uncle Benny.

“A lot of family members of our patients came in and said to me, ‘Thank God we found this place,’ ” Ricci said. “I think a lot of these patients and

their caregivers had gone from dentist to dentist before finding us."

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